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JULY

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EDITORIAL

GORDON VAN GELDER

AS WE approach the end of the 1990s, I think it's safe to say that cinema has been the dominant art form of the Twentieth Century.

Painting, drama, sculpture, dance, or song — nothing else in recent decades has enjoyed the widespread impact and prevalence of moving pictures. In fact, one could argue that film has done what Virginia Woolf predicted the novel would do: subsume all other forms. Music is composed specifically for films, dance scenes likewise choreographed, and tremendous sets are crafted for scenes that may not even appear in the final movie. And in recent years we've seen novels like *Dracula* and *Great Expectations* adapted for film and then adapted back into novelizations — the movies even remake classic books in their own image!

So let me welcome you to the special film issue by asking this: how come you're not out watching a movie?

Of course that's not a sincere question, but it's a good focal point for the things I've observed while assembling. Because it seems to me that there's a lot of interesting interplay (good and bad) going on between fiction and film. Here are a few disjointed thoughts on the subject:

The "expert opinions" you'll find throughout this issue are just that — *opinions*. We're not really looking to tell anyone in Hollywood how to do their job.

Perhaps the most interesting thing I found in these lists is the extent to which writers cast their own novels. John Kessel tried his hand at it with good results in *Corrupting Dr. Nice*, but even more interesting was Ursula Le Guin's reaction when I showed her John's line-up for *The Left Hand of Darkness*. She agreed with some choices, disagreed with others, and said definitively, "Michael Dorn was born to be Genly. (I wish somebody would tell Michael Dorn about this destiny of his.)" Now, Ursula obvi-

ously didn't write the novel with Mr. Dorn in mind, but I wonder how many writers nowadays do have an actor or actress in mind as they're writing. Are our dreams any better or worse if we borrow players from the big screen?

Paul Di Filippo taught me a scary fact, one borne out by the testimony herein of Pat Cadigan and Howard Waldrop: there is no idea too dumb for Hollywood. Paul showed me his outlandish spoof "Never Let Them See You Nova," in which he envisions an adaptation of Olaf Stapledon's *Starmaker* as a musical...and the end result still seemed much smarter than some of the grade-z sci-fi films I've had the misfortune to see. Maybe it's just a question of scale, but cinema's biggest goofs seem to sink much lower than fiction's corresponding sludge. Ed Wood would have done a marvelous job of adapting Pel Torro's *Galaxy 666*, don't you think?

It seems to me that many stories nowadays feel like they're written for the movies. Cast members aside, the pacing and the arc of the story appear to be crafted with a feature film in mind, and even the prose styles tend to be more cinematic. I was most struck by this

observation last year when I was reading Walter M. Miller's *Saint Leibowitz and the Wild Horse Woman*. This book had nothing of the movies to it — there were no camera angles, jump-cuts, or scenes fading to black in it. Every line carried weight, in a way that's very uncommon now. Terry Bisson's lighter concluding sections of the novel pointed up the difference for me; Miller's writing felt pre-cinematic to me, almost as though it were written in the Nineteenth Century. (Perhaps a better way to see what I mean would be to sit down with the novel and the novelization of *Great Expectations* and just compare the writing.)

Terry Bisson's own "Incident at Oak Ridge" in this issue is an interesting case. Here we have a story written specifically in the language of film. Would the story be any different if it were told in a more traditional narrative format? I'll tell you too that Terry staged a dramatic reading of the story in New York last year and lines of dialogue that seemed ordinary on the page — such as the Sergeant barking "Shut up!" — were pretty funny when spoken the wrong way. We're definitely talking about different media here.

The darkened room, all eyes on

the pulpit, the cant and ritual, the spectacle — going to the movies has a lot in common with organized religion. Harvey Jacobs understands sin and sacrifice in society. If I ever go to the movies with him, I assure you I'll pass the popcorn as soon as he asks for it. Amen.

In the movie *Jackie Brown*, the heist consists of switching paperbacks for bundles of cash in a shopping bag. One book gets a nice bit of screen time: *Short Blade* by Peter R. Emshwiller. When that novel was up there on the big screen, it occurred to me that millions of people — millions — would be exposed to the novel in this manner. The cost of mounting an ad campaign that could reach as many people would be staggering. I stayed through the movie credits and noticed that the set dresser for *Jackie Brown* was none other than Peter R. Emshwiller himself. Nice going, Stoney.

There really haven't been many successful film adaptations of science fiction novels — the only ones that stand out for me are Kubrick's *2001* and *A Clockwork Orange*, and I believe the former is more of a collaboration than an adaptation. Even good adaptations of "Flowers

for Algernon" (*Charly*) and *Crash* fall short of the original stories for me. I think the problem is a fundamental difference in the media. Film sf relies on various elements of spectacle, visually, and those extravaganzas will just never match the pleasures of the imagination. There are too many intrinsic properties in the act of reading that movies cannot recreate.

Sf movies have provided lots of great entertainment, and I hope they do so forever, but they'll never substitute for the great narrative that sweeps you away. Barry Longyear says he wrote "Enemy Mine" in one long, impassioned session. As Richard Chwedyk's "Auteur Theory" suggests, feature films can't be made with such singular intensity and vision.

So I guess there are some good reasons why you're here with me right now, rather than staring at a screen. For me, there's still nothing like a good story, and the written word is still my favorite medium for communicating one. We have lots of good ones for you in the coming months, including new tales from Kit Reed, Richard Bowes, Rachel Pollack, and Joyce Carol Oates...but enough of the previews already. Let's get on with the show. ♣

Richard Chwedyk lives in Chicago with his wife, a poet and p.r. writer. He works by day as an editor for a chain of suburban community newspapers and teaches creative writing at Oakton Community College. His short fiction and poetry have appeared previously in such magazines as Amazing, Oyez Review, Space and Time, and a publication called Oink!

"Auteur Theory" is a wonderful look behind the camera, where countless compromises and sacrifices transpire in the course of producing a film. And behind all that hard work, well, sometimes you'll find a few unexplained phenomena as well...

Auteur Theory

By Richard Chwedyk

"I do not live in this world alone but in a thousand worlds."

— John Keats, in a letter to his brother

"How good are you girls with the impossible?" Dad asked us as we returned from dinner at his favorite restaurant and settled into his living room.

"Impossible" is not a word Dad uses lightly.

"To me, everything is impossible," I answered. "Teaching. Writing. Living without a car. On Mondays, waking up is impossible."

"I try to do at least one impossible thing a day," said Koren Hume, the graduate student I'd brought back with me from Madison, hands deep in the pockets of her blazer: a dark blue schoolgirl sort of thing with an odd lapel pin that looked something like an atomic energy symbol.

"Why do you ask?" I went to the kitchen to start some coffee.

Dad sat in his usual place at the end of the couch, next to the lamp table. "I saw one of my old films the other day." He cleared his throat, a

sound like a boulder rolling in the bottom hull of a battleship. "Not the way I made it, but the way I *wanted* to make it. Not just a different *cut*, but everything I wanted and couldn't get. A film that doesn't exist — except that it does."

"You're not just talking about an idea, a dream or a vision," I asked, "but a real film?"

He drew a pack of forbidden Winstons from his tweed jacket and put them on the table. He rarely smoked them now, but it comforted him to have them around. "Cath, any film worth seeing is an idea, a dream and a vision. This one —" He gestured to a small cabinet next to the television. "Do you see that box on the top shelf?"

I picked up a frosted plastic tape case. "This one?"

"That's it. Read the name on the box."

"*Flirting with Failure*." It was printed on a cheap computer label.

Koren had settled herself on the floor, crosslegged, and pulled out her tiny black computer, no larger than one of those pocket "organizers." She could summon from it volumes of information, including all sorts of things about Dad and his film career, his books, his teaching — probably even his bank balance and credit rating.

"Shouldn't that be *Flirting with Fate*?" Her voice was smooth and confident, like good prose, with no regional trappings or generational affectations.

"Gregg Kandel nixed the *Flirting with Failure* title." Dad admired the little tyrannosaurus model on the lamp table. "He thought it sounded too negative."

Koren read from the tiny display screen on her machine: "*Flirting with Fate*, USA, 1973. 93 minutes. With Alex Kent, Carol Loesser, Theresa Devlin, Richard McKay. Directed by Andrew Ulaszek."

"I wanted Mark O'Connor and Ellen Abrams to play the leads," he said with his roughly sonorous voice, "but Mark had started a successful run of a play in London and Abrams' agent told her that working with me was the kiss of death."

Koren clucked her tongue at that.

"The logic of actors and agents can seem a bit obtuse, but they had their reasons. Ellen deserved to be in first rate pictures, and my films were never entirely first rate."

"That's not true," Koren said. "You made some wonderful films."

"Out there," Dad raised his finger, "first-rate means big stars and big budgets, which you must admit I never had. For *Flirting*, my usual cinematographer, Ron Wollesky, was on another picture — directing, no less. Allan Gould was editing some hopeless mess of a Nazi vampire picture. Gregg wouldn't pay Jon Nelsen his usual fee for writing the score, and I can't remember why Bud Tanner wasn't there, but he was sorely missed." He lowered his head and looked at us over the rims of his glasses. "Kandel cut the budget on me twice in the middle of shooting, which killed four days of location shots and two days of re-shoots. My second unit was made up of inept USC interns. Gregg wanted six minutes of cuts after the previews, and this after having me race through the editing. Alex and Carol in the leads — " He held out an open, wavering hand. " — they did what they could."

I hadn't seen *Flirting with Fate* in years, but I said, "It's really not that bad a picture."

"Sure," Dad pulled up his glasses and rubbed the side of his nose. "But that's about all you *can* say for it — that it's not *that* bad."

"They have a print of it up in Madison," Koren said. "I saw it five times. It's a gem."

He fought off a smile. "A flawed gem. But thank you both."

He may have spoken to both of us, but Koren had his attention. They eyed each other like fellow conspirators.

I didn't know what to make of Koren Hume. She'd found me a few weeks before at the small college in Madison where I teach, and approached me in the midst of a chaotic rehearsal for *Oedipus at Colonus* which I had been railroaded into supervising by the department chairperson. I mistook Koren for a high school girl, fashionably lean and pale, in that blazer, with a "gamine" hairdo that really belonged to Louise Brooks or Colleen Moore. She wanted to know if I was Andrew Ulaszek's daughter, and would I be able to arrange an interview with him.

I was so preoccupied with a rebellion caused by my suggestion that the chorus be mixed into the audience, like *agents provocateurs*, I could pay little attention to the thesis she rolled before my eyes on her Lilliputian screen. I told her I would mention the interview to Dad and get

back to her. She smiled back, stoical, patient, and determined. I could have used her in the cast.

When I called Dad about the interview, he said, "Sure. Always willing to tell a few stories."

"I believe in stories," is Dad's version of the Nicene Creed. When he gets going he can make you a believer as well.

On a chilly, fog-gray Friday in April, Ms. Hume and I took the Van Galder bus to Chicago. She worked away on her little machine while I stared lazily out the window. Koren, I decided, was one of those calmly driven persons I can't regard without suspicion. Wildly driven, passionately driven: those I understand. But smooth, precise concentration affects me like muffled ticking from a small brown package with no return address.

We took a cab to the far north side where Dad lives with his second wife, Anna (a sweet lady, but in no way a stepmother). His condo is on a dead end street that terminates at a cluster of red brick "Georgian" townhouses. Many seniors live on that block, but I couldn't think of Dad, at seventy, as one of them.

After the interview, I arranged with my brother to put us up for the night at his home in Hyde Park. Dad also suggested Koren visit Jon Nelsen, the composer, who lived on the Gold Coast, and I agreed to take her there.

Anna was in San Francisco on business, so we had Dad all to ourselves and, charmed by Ms. Hume's attention, he was at his charming best. Dad is bald, white-bearded, and a little frail, as one might expect, but he still stands tall, and there's something in his blue-gray eyes — when they become huge and baleful like some Byzantine saint's portrait — that is fiercely commanding. His face is the illustration that accompanies every story he tells.

And so he told us about *Flirting with Fate* and *Flirting with Failure*.

"I know how good it *could* have been." The dim amber lamplight accented his facial creases — worry lines when he looked down, smile lines when he looked up, "pain" lines when he looked at me. He pulled a cigarette from the pack but didn't light it. "When you're the captain of a sinking pleasure boat you at least try to make the disaster entertaining. Cath, would you put that tape in the machine, please?"

"Wait for the coffee." I returned to the kitchen and braced myself.

It's not that I don't like his films, but I see each one as a kind of farewell: an eccentric response, I know, but my parents' divorce came at a difficult time in my life (as if there's an easy time). Dad exited faultlessly, but no good-bye is ever good enough for a child. He put up with a lot of shit from me, simply put, but I also became his most loyal defender. With typical adolescent conceit, I imagined everything he wrote, every film he made, was a secret message to me.

I returned to the living room with the coffee. Koren listened with rapt attention, pointing her machine at Dad, recording his words.

"No two people ever see the same movie. Movies are suggestion. Evocation. If there's an art to movies, that's it. It's amazing how much cheap scenery and bad cutting we'll put up with for a dream, a vision, an idea." He looked up at me — smile lines. "That's why the current crop of movies doesn't interest me — technically superior but otherwise vacant. The technician *depicts*; the artist *evokes*."

"Do you see yourself as an artist, then?" she asked as I handed Dad his coffee.

"That doesn't matter." He blew into the still-too-hot mug. "A director is nothing but a sort of social secretary. A stager of train wrecks."

"You're a writer, too. Is a writer also a stager of train wrecks?"

"Yes, but a writer has more responsibility. A movie's parentage is a murky, dubious affair."

"You don't follow the *politique des auteurs*, then?" Her French pronunciation was enviable.

Dad stroked his lower lip with the forbidden Winston. "When you're a director, you're just another subordinate craftsman at work on the big cathedral. You're not an author so much as a conductor, a catalyst. When no amount of inspiration can save a picture, you still have to keep things moving. If a novel isn't working you can put it in a file cabinet. You can't fit a cast and crew, Mitchell cameras and Steenbecks into a file cabinet, not when you have three producers waiting for you to part the Red Sea. You work by your wits and experience, not by the *politique des auteurs*." He turned to me. "Now let's see the film."

I slipped the tape into the VCR and, with the remote and my coffee, struggled into the incongruous, steel-tubed "Swedish" chair that no one else can manage to get into or out of.

"If no two people ever see the same film," I readied my finger over the 'play' button, "no two people can *make* the same film, can they?"

He drew the unlit cigarette from his mouth, raised an eyebrow and smiled at me. "Let's find out."

The tape began with the film's countdown leader and with no FBI warning: signs of an unauthorized film-to-tape transfer, but one of some quality. In the opening scene, the central character has his back to the camera as he engages in a heated phone conversation. He slams the phone down and turns around.

It's Mark O'Connor.

"Dad — "

"Ssshh!" — from Koren.

After O'Connorsuffers a heart attack, the credits roll: "Mark O'Connor, Ellen Abrams, *Flirting with Failure* — "

"Oh my God — "

Dad held the tip of his finger to his lips.

I saw all the names of the people Dad wanted — the ones who *didn't* work on it — *working* on it, demonstrably so. The camera work had more depth-of-field, and the night shots were highlighted with deep neon hues. There was more unity of color and shape in the production design. The editing was sharp and balanced, the score filled with lovely ironies. The opening theme was catchy, strangely familiar. It could have made a good pop song.

Dad watched it all, his left eye shut: the director's squint, inspecting every frame, every fleck of emulsion.

When O'Connor has his last, fatal heart attack at the end of the film, in Abrams's car, and he tosses his lighter back over his shoulder, it was the perfect — the only — gesture.

And Abrams's performance was the real revelation of the film. She exuded the husky, erotic charm of a hybrid Bacall. Had she actually made this film she wouldn't have descended to playing cranky mavens on soap operas.

Had she made this film — I was *watching* it, laughing through the first half and blubbering by the end: at another farewell.

I knew what Dad meant now. *Flirting with Fate* was a good little picture. *Flirting with Failure* was a little masterpiece.

The tape ran all the way to the end. I dropped the remote somewhere on the floor as I pushed my glasses up on my head and dabbed at my eyes with a piece of used tissue retrieved from my jacket pocket. When I slipped my glasses back down, I noticed Koren staring at me, smiling in a way that seemed partly pitying and partly derisive.

My voice squeaked as I said, "It was wonderful, Dad."

"Thank you." He pulled out a small disposable lighter. "I think I needed you to see it—to prove to myself that I haven't lost my mind." He finally lit his forbidden Winston. "Now I can erase it."

"What!" I sprang from the Swedish torture chair.

"I can erase it." He exhaled a jet of smoke. "It doesn't belong here."

"Belong?" I shook my head. "Where *should* it belong?"

"I don't know." He finished the cold dregs of his coffee. "But it doesn't belong in this world. I didn't make it. You can look for this version in the *Times Index*, and the *Screen Achievement Record*. You'll never find it. It's not a remake. You can tell from all the peripheral details, including the film stock, that this thing was made about the same time I made *Flirting with Fate*."

He tapped his cigarette against a small china ashtray on the coffee table. "It's not computer-generated. I get over to some of the local studios and I've seen what they can do with imaging and matching. Incredible stuff, but they can't do *this* yet, not at under twenty times my original budget. What *motive* would someone have to recreate the technical limitations of 1973 for *this* film?"

I slowly eased myself back into the torture chair.

"You asked before if no two people could make the same film." He pointed his cigarette at me. "That was Ron's camera work, Jon's music, Allan's cutting. A guy sitting down at a Mac can't fake signature work like that. If they could, it would be for commercial reasons. It wouldn't end up on a tape transfer sent to me by Terry Boyle."

"Boyle?" I rolled my eyes. "Oh shit!"

Koren picked up her computer. "Who's Boyle?"

"He lives down the street." Dad crushed out his forbidden. "Runs a video business out of his basement. Big, hefty, Vietnam vet in a motorized wheelchair. Runs ads in film collector magazines for his public domain stuff. On the side, he does other things, some of it not so legal. He found

out I lived nearby when he signed up for one of my film classes and he started to invite me over to drink scotch and talk. He loves movies, if you can call things like *Slaughterority House* and *Feargasm* movies." He shook his head and rubbed his temple with his palm. "He has a brain, of sorts. Angry. Bitter. Paranoid as hell, with a sophisticated home security system — motion sensors, computerized locks, the whole deal."

Koren's fingers danced over the impossibly tiny keys of her machine — she could probably play a piano the size of a postage stamp too. "Why do you see him?"

Dad shrugged. "He's lonely. I've worked with a lot of guys like him. Bawdy bastard. I took Cath with me once and he couldn't keep his hands off her."

My elbow slipped from the steel-tubed armrest. "We needn't discuss that."

"Not married?" Koren asked.

"Oh, he married his high school sweetheart, the cheerleading captain. She works the second shift at the White Castle."

"Will he tell us where he got the film?" Koren stood up, stretched, smoothed the pleats of her tiny skirt.

Dad shook his head. "All he'll probably tell you is that he got it from a guy who got it from a guy."

"And yet it has to come from somewhere." I stood up and paced before his Great Wall of Books on the other side of the living room.

"Well, we've both written some science fiction." He affectionately rubbed the head of the tyrannosaurus on the lamp table. "We should be able to come up with something."

"Come on." Computers. Aliens. Time travel. I stared at all the titles on the shelves.

He walked over to the liquor cabinet and took out a bottle of Glenfiddich. "I know I have some ideas. Anyone care to join me?"

"I really shouldn't," I said.

"Neither should I. My doctor would have a heart attack if he could see me now. Miss Hume?"

"No thanks." She saluted him casually. "I'm on duty."

He poured two small glasses. "I'd have to card you anyway. But you see why I have to erase the tape, don't you?"

"No," I said. "I don't see why at all."

"Because it's false evidence for a history that didn't happen. I know what film I made and it wasn't this one. Every day some new clown comes along claiming that this or that event never occurred, or that something else did." He handed me a glass. "As banal as another Elvis sighting or as evil as these new fascists denying the Holocaust."

Before he sat down again, he looked at one of the photographs that cluttered the lamp table, the shot of Dad standing with John Ford. "One little film. 'So what?' you might say. Print the legend, especially if it compliments you. But at my age, seven-eighths of me *is* history. I can't see it eroded without seeing *myself* eroded. Do I sound like a nut?"

I said, "No," but I couldn't have sounded too convincing. The pain lines were visible again as he sat down.

"Dad, that this film *should* exist is one matter. That it *does* is more important. We should find out where it came from."

He sipped his scotch, pulled out another forbidden and turned to Koren.

"What do you think, Miss Hume?"

She looked a little startled, but answered calmly. "I think where it came from is a *very* important matter."

Dad put her to the sort of one-eyed scrutiny with which he had just subjected *Flirting with Failure*. "My son teaches Philosophy down at U. of C., you may know. He's been involved in a cooperative project with the Physics department, evaluating some of their logic systems. He told me not too long ago that some of their faculty are working on a cosmological theory that starts from the premise that one universe just isn't enough. They theorize that there are an indefinite number of universes, emanating like ripples in a pond from the point of the Big Bang. They call these concentric universes 'probabilities.' Interesting notion, isn't it?"

She blushed a little, but her expression remained convivial. "What evidence have they found so far?"

"From what Richard tells me, nothing more than some plausible math."

Koren lost some of her flush and smiled sweetly.

"Well, that's a whole other matter, I suppose. We can discuss it some other time." He held his hand out to me. "Now Cath, if you'll just hand me that remote —"

"Are you still planning to erase the tape?"

Pain lines again. "Just hand me the remote."

Above the couch was a framed silkscreen poster for a Polish production of *Faust*, the doctor's features in red, Mephistopheles in black; the face of one was the shadow of the other. I struggled from the chair once more, pressing the "eject" button on the remote. The VCR spat out the tape, which I returned to its case and dropped into my purse.

"Maybe I'm dense, Dad, but this is the only evidence we have of something, well, 'impossible.' We can't destroy it until we at least *try* to find out where it came from and how it was made."

"As usual, Cath is right." He walked over to the telephone in the dining room. "We should start by calling Boyle."

"Makes sense." Koren picked up her computer. "You said he lives close by."

"You can see the place from the window." He dialed the number. "The townhouse with the ramp." Then, into the mouthpiece: "Terry? It's Andrew. Yes, just finished watching it. First-rate transfer. Listen, would it be possible —"

Koren perused the contents of the Wall of Books as he spoke, and came upon a novel Dad had written. She took it from the shelf, opened it and started to read.

"What?" Dad rubbed his brow. "Yes she is, as matter of fact. And another girl, a graduate student. I want you on your best behavior."

From across the room I could hear Boyle's cackling laugh coming through the earpiece.

Dad hung up the phone and said, "We're on for eight tomorrow."

"Fine." I felt my stomach drop.

Back in the living room, Koren held up the book to show Dad. The title was *Facing the Music*.

"Mind if I borrow this?"

"With my compliments." He put his hand on my shoulder. "Sure you want to go through with this?"

"No, but what else can we do? And what was all that stuff about 'probabilities?'"

"I'm not sure. Richard should be here to pick you up any minute. In the meantime, keep your eyes open. You never know where you might find an answer."

He stared straight at Koren, who was pulling one of those toy "clickers" or "crickets" from her pocket: one of those things stamped out of cheap metal in the approximate shape of an insect, with another piece of metal angled out from its underside; you press that piece and it makes a little clicking sound. She held it carefully between thumb and forefinger, like a weapon, which she "aimed" at my purse.

Click!

I felt a tingle run through me, but for all the force of her gesture nothing else came of it. I do recall thinking that anyone who would choose Dad as a thesis topic should be forgiven a few eccentricities.

"I've read your book on Aquinas. Wonderful piece of speculative philosophy." Koren sat in the back seat of Richard's Toyota, reading Dad's novel by the erratic glare of the lights on Lake Shore Drive.

"We're all philosophers in this family. We just have different ways of doing it."

Richard looks much like Dad did thirty years ago: fair hair just starting to gray, thinning a little; the prominent nose; clean-shaven and sad-eyed. "I heard you're visiting Jon Nelsen tomorrow."

"Well, Jon and Dad worked on so many films together."

Richard nodded, eyes on the road. "He'll be glad to see you again." He turned up the Brahms sextet on the radio. They're all glad to see me, I thought: old artists, lonely academics, "responsible" gentlemen looking for dutiful daughter-figures. I stared out at all the Gold Coast buildings, into lighted windows with glimpses of elegant living rooms. Dad could be living in one of those places, I thought. Or in Paris, as Anna always dreamed of doing.

Instead of — where? Colonus? Dad was no Oedipus, but he had a touch of exile in him, like Oedipus. Like Sophocles.

I looked back at Koren, still reading Dad's novel. "You'll ruin your eyes," I said.

She smiled and flashed up at me the little book light that was built into her computer.

"Does that thing have an ATM too?"

She returned to her book. The lights on the Drive caught her lapel pin for an instant: crossed ellipsoids like the paths of orbiting particles, and

below them the initials H.E.L. What did they stand for? Haverford Energy Librarians? *Halcyon Ego Lux*? I was ready to ask her outright when she pointed excitedly out her window.

"There's the Field Museum! Remember that scene in *Return from the Lost World* when the tyrannosaurus breaks loose and charges down — were they the north steps?"

They were, I remembered. I remembered the music as well, the odd, triumphant little fanfare when the captive king breaks free. A pure Jon Nelsen touch for a pure Andrew Ulaszek film.

IT WAS LATE when we got to Richard's. The children were long asleep, but Hollis was still up, waiting to show Koren the guest room. She wore a bright red robe, and still looked like a model for *'Teen*, while I felt something like Sarah Bernhardt in her final days, hobbling off to her coffin. In high school, Hollis and I had been best friends.

She brought down some blankets and pillows to make the couch more comfortable for me. I begged one more cup of coffee off Richard, who sat down with me in the kitchen. "So," he picked up a teaspoon on the table, "Where did you find this kid?"

"Koren?" I stretched my legs out on the chair next to me. "I explained already. She found me."

"You didn't tell me anything about that computer of hers."

"Should I have? What do I know about computers?"

"I don't know that much either." He leaned back in his chair. "I do know that there's nothing on the market that small that can do *that* many things." He raised the teaspoon and stared at its convex surface. "Even if there were, they wouldn't have built-in book lights."

He put down the spoon and stared at me until my face stung. "Another thing: when I drove up tonight, I found a minivan parked in Dad's space." Dad has a parking space in the condo lot. Not having a car, he never uses it, so friends and family park there when they visit. "A dark green Voyager — except that the logo on the back, in the lower right corner, said *Voyageur*."

I shrugged. "On the left side did it say 'Plymouth'?"

He sat forward, fingers knitted. "Factory goof-up? Foreign model? I

don't know. It's the sort of detail you might miss. Then the driver returned, a young woman, dressed in perfect schoolgirl attire — plaid skirt, blazer, the works. Even wore a tie. Intelligent-looking kid, with long, straight brown hair. Big dark eyes."

"So?" I struggled to appear indifferent, staring at a drawing stuck to the refrigerator door: a squiggly figure with stick legs and flat feet, executed by my little niece and labeled in her shaky hand "Grandpa." "Lots of girls dress like that. There's a Catholic high school right down the street."

"Do they all carry computers like that one Koren has?" He held his hands flat on the table. "Do they all wear those odd little lapel pins?"

"You noticed it too?" I slipped my legs off the chair and sat forward, leaning toward him as far as the table would allow me. "H.E.L.?"

"Has Everyone Left? Hubris Endangers Lincoln?" He pushed back his seat and stood up. "Is this some trend we missed?"

I picked up my purse and pulled out the frosted plastic box with the videocassette. "You want 'odd'? How's your VCR working?"

"Perfectly, but it's a little late." As if to demonstrate, he yawned.

"Just a few minutes. The opening credits — just to see what I mean."

He almost relented when Hollis came in, slipping her arm around his waist. "I'm here to collect my husband."

Richard leaned forward and kissed me on the cheek. "First thing tomorrow. Promise."

Hollis kissed me good night, and wrinkled her nose. "Have you been smoking again?"

"Do you know what H.E.L. stands for?" I asked.

"Huge Elephants Laughing," she said without hesitation.

They went upstairs. I dragged myself over to the couch, coffee in one hand, tape and purse in the other. I turned on the TV and VCR, adjusting the volume to a whisper, and slipped the tape into the machine. Just a few minutes of the opening, that's all I wanted, to ensure my own sanity. I pushed the "play" button —

— and saw nothing. Heard nothing — a screen of solid blue, like you see when you inadvertently put a blank tape into the machine.

I advanced the tape a few minutes, and then a few more minutes — solid blue.

So much for my insurance.

The only thing I could recall, as I tossed the humiliating thing back into my purse, was Koren, with her toy cricket.

Click!

When I did, at last, fall asleep on the lumpy couch, I dreamed of commandos dressed like schoolgirls, or schoolgirls dressed like commandos, falling from the night sky under plaid parachutes.

"I always found it amusing to come down to the set," Jon Nelsen said from the front row of his own private screening room. "It was bustling by six-thirty, but the insurers wouldn't let Andrew direct until their doctor checked him out, as if being on the set were the only stressful part of the job."

Jon's screening room, in its Art Deco pinks and grays, was lined with beautiful, valuable posters from the silent era. To the left of the screen stood a white Baldwin grand on which he would sometimes play his own accompaniments. The rest of his huge apartment held a small museum's worth of Art Nouveau objects and furniture: beautiful pieces by Guimard, Berroneau, and Charpentier. From his windows you could look out at Lincoln Park as if it were your own private Versailles. Even on that cold April afternoon, the view was painfully beautiful.

Jon himself had always been movie-star-handsome and remained so, even with his lined face and neatly groomed hair now completely white, in his rose-colored sweater and gray slacks.

"Everyone thought he was going to die after he finished *Living the Lost*," he said softly.

Koren raised her computer, recording each little cough and hesitation. She wore a plaid skirt today, and a tie over her white blouse made her look even more the schoolgirl.

"So did I," I said.

Jon smiled warmly. "Now he's outlived two doctors and is working on a third."

We had just finished watching some film clips from an unreleased documentary made while Dad worked on that last film. It was fun to see Dad with hair again, and wearing it long. He looked frail even then, but the camera caught him in turns both gentle and commanding, always

concentrated, chewing out an actor for overplaying a scene, then giving Emily Rankin a hug for getting through a tough close-up.

"We'd argue for hours, but I loved it." Jon stood up, Koren following like a mismatched shadow. "He only fought when he respected you. He knows how important a good score is to a film. Not many directors would bring me in during pre-production." He ran his finger over his mustache. "We were almost collaborators. He'd whistle melodies that I'd end up using. I'd want to give him credit, but he'd say, 'What can I do with it? You're the composer.'"

He smiled at me again, maybe a little too warmly this time. It brought out the little bags under his eyes.

I wandered over to the white Baldwin. I'm no musician, but I can plunk out a tune, and one had been stuck in my head since the night before.

"Did he ever tell you why he quit?" Koren asked.

"Three heart attacks," I said, playing B and C-sharp off each other, like testing both sides of a seesaw. "A so-called 'mild' stroke — "

Jon folded his arms. "He told me once he wanted to live long enough to see his kids grow up and make it on their own."

I slowly found the melody: B to C-sharp, C-sharp to A. Richard and Hollis are tenured, I thought. My sister runs her own design business. Then there's me, at the tail-end of a two-year visitor's contract, with no great prospects of renewal. I date divorced professors and sell a book every few years, when I'm lucky. Poor Dad, I'll keep him alive forever.

Koren kept plugging away. "Was he disappointed with the lack of credit he received?"

"He called himself 'A guy who makes fungus monster movies.'" Jon came over and stood to my left. Even in my faltering, halting rendition, he seemed to recognize the melody. "Truth is, he influenced everyone, but no one will 'fess up to it. He's in touch with the *zeitgeist*. All I can do is bring the trumpets in like Mahler, on cue."

"Not true." I tried the next part of the melody: C-sharp, E, back down to D, D-flat — I stared at the two bronze nymphs atop the piano, raising candles with upstretched arms, long curls and flowing shifts over their skimpy figures.

"Tempo," Jon placed his left hand on the keyboard, filling the chords

in. "It's all in the tempo. This way," he followed my slow pace, "it's just a theme. *This way*," he quickened the beat to something livelier, "it's a pop song."

"You're right!" I followed along. "I remember this song now! This was pretty popular twenty years ago. Didn't Streisand or someone record this?"

He pressed his lips into a strange smile, looking proud and embarrassed.

"I still hear it on elevators, or when my bank puts me on hold." He turned to Koren. "Most of what you see here was purchased on its royalties, and from the commissions I received on this song's reputation."

Jon took over, playing with both hands. I stepped back. "And the melody?"

"Andrew again. I was supposed to do a score for him — some little picture that didn't work out — *Flaunting, Flirting* — something like that."

I opened my mouth, but Koren had her little cricket toy out again. My heartbeat doubled.

"Sorry," I said to Jon. "Doesn't ring a bell."

"It was so long ago. I'd worked out this theme, but my part in the project fell through. Your father suggested I try to sell it as a song. He introduced me to George Estenburg, the lyricist. Even that I have to thank him for."

"Everyone should have a song like that," I said.

"Everyone does, I think, but they throw it away. Or they never listen to it." He played the last chord with his foot hard on the pedal, so that it took forever to decay.

Koren put her toy away.

"We have to get back now, Jon. Thanks for everything."

"You're always welcome, Cathy." He stared at me from a dark corner of his solitude. "Give my regards to your father. Miss Hume, it was a pleasure."

In the elevator down, I said to Koren, "I wasn't going to mention *Flirting with Failure*, if that's what you were worried about."

"I'm not worried."

"Look, I'm not going to ask you a lot of questions about who you are

and what you're doing here, because you wouldn't tell me anyway, but your coming here and that film are connected, aren't they?"

She looked at me, expressionless. Inscrutable.

"Fine. I don't care. Just assure me that you won't do anything to hurt my father."

Her brows knit slightly as she turned a sort of pitying smile upon me. "I would never do anything to hurt your father. You can count on that."

The way she said it, I felt I should have asked for more.

"Welcome to my world."

Terry Boyle extended his huge, muscled arm and gestured to the chaos of video machines, tape editors, duping systems, slave decks, movie projectors, and ceiling-high metal shelves that made up "Cultural Accessories, Ltd." A wheelchair-wide path shaped the chaos into a maze; one small corner had been conceded to Stacy Boyle's washer and dryer. A lift, built into one wall of the stairwell, facilitated Boyle's moves from Stacy's sedate, neat-as-a-pin kitchen to this underworld. He sat in the approximate center of the labyrinth, before an elaborate console, the crowning glory of which was a giant TV screen set on a platform of orange crates mounted on a table.

Dad, Koren, and I were trying to look anywhere *but* the screen, on which a half-clothed, panic-stricken girl ran through a dark attic until a noose dropped down from the ceiling and slipped too easily around her neck.

"How about that?" Boyle gawked at the screen like a boy at his first matinee, and over the soundtrack of a stifled cry and a sickening snap, he pronounced, "Now that's real moviemaking!"

"Let's get back to the subject," Dad said, revealing some strain at this, his third try, to fix Boyle's attention to the matter of *Flirting with Failure*.

"Yeah. Just wanted to see her legs kick again." He rolled himself over to the VCR and ejected the tape. The chair hardly seemed equal to his girth, but he maneuvered it with a facility that made it seem just another article of his apparel, like his jeans or his stained Barbarella T-shirt.

"Guy I know picked them up at a post office auction. About a dozen of them. Yours was one." His gray-green eyes turned to Dad, who was seated in a blue canvas director's chair that Boyle especially reserved for

him. "Sixteen millimeter prints, in sweet condition, except for the sprocket gauging — like something from Afghanistan." He snorted a laugh, his long, narrow nose sharply pointed hellward. "Weirdest shit I've ever seen. But you know me. Got a buddy who's a tool and die maker to cast some sprocket wheels and a gate trigger — stuck them on the trusty Bell and Howell — VOOM! — We're in business."

He picked up a jelly jar glass adorned with a picture of Jughead, from Archie Comics, and took a healthy sip of Cutty Sark. "Speaking of business, Andrew, you, uh, wouldn't happen to know who holds the rights to that flick, would you?"

We all had jelly jar glasses of Cutty, but only Boyle was drinking. I left mine on the card table next to me, while I sat on a wobbly folding chair. Koren sat on the cleared-off portion of a desk that served as part of Boyle's console, her legs crossed suggestively and the hem of her skirt only just covering her hips.

Dad shook his head. "As if you ever really concerned yourself with rights."

Boyle smirked proudly as he gripped the armrests of his chair. "Well, only if it's pretty *blatantly* owned."

Dad opened his mouth, but Koren beat him to the draw. "Then you *do* intend to market this film."

"I'll market anything and everything I can get my hands on." He raised his right hand, fingers outstretched, then clenched them violently. His grasp was considerable. I looked at the "Death from Above" tattoo on his right bicep. It had stretched and grown pudgy with its owner.

He slipped another tape into the VCR.

"Matter of fact, I had an idea the other day." The big screen came to life again with the old RKO logo, the radio beacon on the globe, sending out its little lightning bolts and radio waves. "We could tag an intro onto your film, with you talking about how you made it, all that stuff. What it was like to work with Ellen Abrams — man, was *she* a killer chick back then!" For punctuation, he slapped the desk. It was a sturdy piece of furniture.

Koren hardly flinched. She tapped away at her computer.

I was distracted by the bold white letters on a black background, up on the big screen: "A Mercury Production."

"You really doing a thesis about the old guy?" From the way he bent his head, Boyle looked like he was talking to Koren's knees.

She stared back coolly and smiled.

On the screen appeared the title, *Heart of Darkness*. My jaw dropped.

"What is that thing?" Boyle pointed to her computer.

"A lie detector," she said.

Bassoons, accompanied by the low thunder of timpani, rumbled from the big speakers under the screen, sounding so much like Bernard Herrmann's music it gave me chills.

"Catch me at any lies yet?" Boyle placed two fingers down on the edge of the desk and "walked" them, like little legs, toward Koren. "You could get in on this too, you know. For the intro, you could interview Andrew, on camera, and give all the background shit. You know, like Leonard Maltin."

She smiled impassively, looking nothing like Leonard Maltin. Boyle walked his fingers back slowly.

On the screen, a group of men sat on the deck of a boat, at twilight, with a backdrop London in the distance. One of the men puffed on a cigar as he said, "And this, also, has been one of the dark places of the Earth."

One might mistake the appearance, but that was the voice of Joseph Cotten: no other like it — in this world.

"I know a guy who could shoot the whole thing for almost nothing. Professional too." He gave Dad a venal, superfluous wink. "Eight percent per unit sold, and I figure I can sell a few thousand of these in the first year. What do you say?"

Dad picked up his Sabrina the Teen Witch jelly jar and stared straight through it. He listened to Boyle's jabber like someone experienced in the talk of agents, producers, and money men of all shapes. "Not interested," he said.

"Why not?"

"There's no 'why' about it, Terry. 'Not interested' means 'not interested.'"

"Oh." Boyle closed his mouth into a little "o." "What would fifteen percent do to your interest?"

"Not even fifty." He stared at the glass but didn't drink. "Not even one hundred."

Boyle's lips formed the little "o" again. On the screen, Joseph Cotten, as Marlow, was having his head measured by an old man with calipers. "In the tropics, one must before everything keep calm."

"Can you believe this guy?" Boyle said, now addressing Koren's thighs. While so distracted, I gestured to Dad and pointed up at the screen. He signaled back with his finger over his lips.

"How many have you sold so far?" Koren asked, not looking up from her computer.

Boyle sneered indignantly, like a haughty Herod from an old biblical epic. "I can sell anything, and I know what sells. Look up there." He pointed to the screen. "Orson Welles. That'll sell itself! *All* those prints! I can sell them *all*!"

For an instant he glanced at something behind me, where one wall of the basement was lined with metal shelves. Dad stared over the top of his glass; Koren shifted her eyes from the tiny display screen, both of them marking where Boyle's glance had gone.

While he refilled his jughead glass, I twisted around in my seat. The shelves behind me were loaded with old film cases, the paperboard type, with metal reinforcements on the corners and closed with crossed canvas straps. Most of the cases were a dirty brick red or slate gray, but one stack contained about a dozen cases, light gray, that looked cleaner and less battered about. They weren't labeled, but I could guess what they were.

Before going over to Boyle's, I had caught Dad and Koren quietly conferring. They wouldn't let me in on their conspiracy, but by now I had it almost all figured out.

"In other words," continued Koren, "you haven't sold any yet."

"No," Boyle said, annoyed enough to look her straight in the face. "Like an idiot I'm waiting for *him*." He pointed at Dad. "I want his to be the first in the series. I just started transferring this one." He pointed at *Heart of Darkness*, up on his screen. "The others will come later."

Koren looked as if that were the answer she was looking for.

And it made sense to me, too. I looked up at the screen: Cotten as Marlow, George Coulouris as the accountant, Ray Collins as the manager—all of them in a film that Orson Welles *never* made, that he *abandoned* to start a new project, *Citizen Kane*. When I saw *Flirting with Failure* the night before, I thought of it as an incredible anomaly, a miracle. But two

anomalies seemed dangerous, because it presumed the possibility of a third, a fourth — and Dad's worries about the integrity of history no longer seemed misplaced.

Wherever these films came from, another universe, a sophisticated lab, or conjured up by a demented sorcerer, I certainly didn't want them in Boyle's hands.

And with any luck, that's what Dad and Koren were trying to prevent as well.

"Look," Boyle said to Dad, "I can just release this as it is. You have no rights to it. I'm doing you a favor."

"I don't recall *asking* for any, Terry."

"You just don't want me to make any money on it, because you think I'm an uneducated slob — "

Dad put his glass down. "I've been squeezed by some of the best con men in the business, Terry. You'll have to do better than that."

A tremor ran through Boyle, the sort of gesture you see in men who are about to do something they'll have to answer for in a court. Dad stared him down, courageously, stupidly stalwart.

Koren already had her cricket out.

"Dad," I said, sounding more than a little nervous, "maybe you should think it over a little more. A few extra bucks might come in handy."

"A few." Boyle snorted.

For the first time in a long while, Dad was the one who looked puzzled as he stared at me. "Cath, what are you — "

"Sure," I said. "You do have some major debts to consider."

He continued looking puzzled, but he fought off an admiring smile, as if he never imagined that I might have a devious streak.

"Listen," I said. "I noticed that Stacy left us some coffee upstairs. Maybe it would be a good idea to take a few minutes — " I made an effort to smile at Boyle.

He admired me through half-closed eyelids, as if reassessing my worth to his operation. "Yeah, sure. Coffee. I'll go up and get you some."

"I'll — I'll give you a hand." I stood up, but Boyle gestured for me to sit back down.

"I'm the host here. You think I'm helpless?" He started up his chair

motor, rolled himself over to the lift and expertly locked his wheels in place on its base. In the next instant he slid up the banister track like an obscenely obese spider.

I looked at Dad first. "I should go up there, right?" I turned to Koren. "How much time do you need?"

She hopped off the desk and made her way to the basement door, tapping something into her computer. "Ten minutes."

"If you really want to help." Dad arched his eyebrow. "You don't have to."

"I don't know what *else* to do. Just tell me what all this is about when we get out of here."

"You already know," Koren said. The box next to the door emitted a little beep. "There won't be time later."

From the screen, Marlow informed us, "Ah! but it was something to have at least a choice of nightmares."

Upstairs, I found Boyle with a tray in his lap. On it, three mugs of coffee, a carton of half and half, an old restaurant sugar dispenser and a scattering of spoons all tottered precariously with the slightest move of his chair. He stared fiercely at these objects as if he could will them not to move.

I quickly grabbed two of the mugs off the tray, before he could stop me.

"I told you —" He reached out and managed to tip over the third mug. "Shit!"

"This is how it's done," I said, taking advantage of his confusion to pick up the tray without his mauling me. "Put the carafe on a trivet. Don't pour anything until you get downstairs. Does that make sense?"

"Aren't you the perfect little housewife." He looked like he wanted to stick my head in the sink and drown me.

"And you're the perfect Pullman porter." I poured out the coffee and started a fresh carafe. That would take ten minutes, I figured.

"Sit in my lap," he said. "I'll give you a horsey ride."

I refilled the carafe and made another effort to smile. From the window over the sink, I could see the parking spaces of the townhouse owners. In one of the spaces, a minivan was parked. I couldn't tell what color it was in the dark, and even though vans like that are more prevalent these days than old-fashioned cars, how many of them came with long-haired girls in

blazers and pleated plaid skirts, opening up the rear door and depositing several movie reels into the back storage area? Perhaps as many as have *Voyageur* instead of *Voyager* in chrome letters on their backs.

I poured the carafe of water into the coffeemaker. The window was set too high to give Boyle much of a view, but why take chances? I had to find the coffee on my own — in a lower cabinet — and the filters — up on the top shelf. Boyle seemed to enjoy watching me bend and stretch. "Perfect little housewife," he repeated, and chuckled.

Once the coffee was going, I stood in the middle of the kitchen, so that if he wanted to ogle me he'd have to sit with his back to the window. It also afforded me a view *through* the window. I could make out Koren now, with an armload of reels, heading for the *Voyageur*.

"So what's the deal with your old man?" Boyle flipped back his long, gray ponytail. "That's why you came up here, isn't it?"

I stood with my arms crossed, legs slightly apart. "I really don't know."

"Or is that why you came up here?" He took out a cigarette and his Zippo from his jeans. "I always figured you couldn't help yourself."

My heart was racing. I could look into Boyle's eyes and see straight through into his head, where an old projector was running, with a film of me, half naked, panic-stricken in a dark attic.

"Doesn't matter. *One* of these days —" He smiled gleefully and lit his cigarette.

"Your old man's one of the few people in this world I respect. He's like me. He's paid more dues than he's owed." He took a deep drag, as if he wanted to consume the whole cigarette in one inhale. "I offered him a straight deal. On the level. Why won't he take it?"

Outside, Koren and the other girl were depositing their third load of movie reels. How much more could there be?

"Don't be so insistent," I said. "You should know he doesn't like to be pushed into things."

"Who's pushing?" His fingers rolled into fists, threatening to crush his cigarette.

"Give him time." I looked outside. The long-haired girl had an armload of reels, but she was carrying them back from the van. What the hell was going on? Koren followed, carrying back another stack.

Boyle offered me a cigarette. His eyes twinkled, making him look like some sort of mutant leprechaun. He wiggled the cigarette between the first and second fingers of his right hand. I hadn't smoked in years, but the stress of the day had worn away my resolve. I reached for it —

— and he grabbed my wrist with his left hand, yanking me forward almost into his lap. I could tell from his grip that it wouldn't have taken much effort for him to snap my bones like sticks of dry pasta. His breath smelled like a mix of scotch and rancid butter.

"Horsey ride?"

"Let go!"

"Tell me why your old man doesn't want me to distribute the film?"

"You sick sack of shit!" I pounded on his chest with my free hand, provoking his laughter. I might as well have pounded the drywall. "If you so much as —"

"Tell me, you little tease!" He gripped my leg with his right hand, just above the knee. His fingers fit almost completely around it.

"It's not the film he made. He thinks it came from another universe!"

He let go of me instantly and burst into laughter. I slipped to the floor, on my knees, cursing him and fighting off tears. I looked at him, wanting to kill him, or just watch him drop dead, but he laughed so hard I thought I just might get my wish. He handed me another cigarette, which I threw across the room. Then he handed me the whole pack and I threw that across the room.

"Oh shit," he said, when his laughter subsided, "I should have known you'd never give me a straight answer."

The coffee was ready. The long-haired girl was just closing up the back of the *Voyageur*. I choked off more tears and arranged all the things on the tray in a neat, balanced fashion.

"Ease up," Boyle said as he took the tray. "Just having a little fun. Of course," he rolled his chair in place on the lift, "if that film *was* from another universe — and the *others* — think of the fortune I'd be sitting on!"

Downstairs, I looked for some sign of activity, of something out of place that would give away the subterfuge, but everything looked as it did before I went upstairs. The film cases were on the shelf. The security door looked undisturbed.

Dad always was good at continuity.

And on the screen, Marlow was accosted by Everett Sloane as the man in rags. "...this man has *enlarged* my mind!"

Dad took one look at me and stood up. "What's the matter? Are you —?"

"It's all right." I sniffled and put my hand on his shoulder until he took his seat again. "Just promise me I never have to come back here."

"Promise," he said softly, and ran his finger across my bangs.

Boyle put the tray down on the card table behind the console. He scowled, scanning the room as carefully as I had just done.

"Feels colder in here, doesn't it?"

The three of us shrugged. Boyle wheeled himself over to the thermostat, looked at it for almost a minute and wheeled himself back.

"Like someone had the door open or something. Or a window." He shrugged. "Like you could open one without setting off the alarm. Or open the door without the combination." He sneered at his own words as if he didn't altogether trust them.

We drank coffee as Boyle continued his sales pitch to Dad, but now he pitched with much less fervor, still looking for some sign of disturbance in his chaos, glancing at the screen just as Welles, in his Kurtz get-up, raspily whispered, "The horror! The horror!"

"It sure ain't no *Citizen Kane*." Boyle scowled, still eyeing the thermostat and the door with suspicion.

By the time Marlow wound up his tale, telling the lie to Kurtz's "intended," Dad got up from his chair. "It's about time we go, Terry." He shook his hand. "I promise I'll think over your offer."

We put on our coats and stood by the basement door, waiting for Boyle to let us out. Instead, he wheeled himself over to the stack of gray film cases, pulled out the top one, undid the straps and looked inside.

"Something the matter, Terry?" Dad adjusted his scarf. All the reels were there. Boyle grunted and closed up the case.

Koren smiled. She was holding out her cricket again. Boyle wheeled himself over to the basement door and punched the combination into the keypad on the little box.

"Hey, Andrew." He pointed to me and winked. "If you'll throw in one of these chicks, I'll give you the whole deal — every last film I've got."

Dad gave him a wry smile. "That might be fatal, Terry."

Boyle opened the door. "You're probably right. I would've died for old Barbarella here." He planted his thumb on his T-shirt, catching the Queen of Space's bare navel. "So she goes to Hanoi while I catch three NVA bullets in Nui Ba Dinh." He looked Koren and me over one more time, top to bottom, smiling, displaying his rows of corn-yellow teeth. "Fatal — but what a fatality!

"Now what's that?" he asked, noticing the cricket.

"Good luck charm." Koren gently nudged me through the door. Dad was already outside.

"No shit?"

"No shit." She raised it up higher and pointed it back into the basement.

Joseph Cotten, in tight close-up, was on the big screen, speaking softly, deeply: "I could not tell her. It would have been too dark — too dark altogether."

"Good luck," Koren said.

Click!

The brooding music became a hiss of white noise. The face of Joseph Cotten fluttered, decayed into a dance of horizontal bars, like luminous chopsticks, before withering away into a field of gray TV snow.

"Hey!" Boyle looked at his screen, then back at Koren, her cricket, viscerally working out a simple causality that I, the night before, had been too rational and sophisticated to accept.

"What in the fucking name of — " He lunged at Koren so swiftly the back of his chair kicked up and threatened to fly out ahead of him. Koren must have anticipated his trajectory, stepped back, and re-aimed the cricket.

Click!

Boyle stopped cold, mouth wide open, frozen like a movie frame stuck in the projector gate.

Koren slammed the door, fiddled with her computer again and urged us up the concrete steps to the gangway sidewalk.

"That took far too long." The long-haired girl stood in the gangway, arms akimbo. "We have twenty-seven minutes."

"For what?" I kept staring back at the basement door.

"Don't worry," Koren said softly, "he's not going anywhere for a while."

"What the hell did you do to him?"

"I can't explain now. The Variable Field Arranger — "

"You're not *allowed* to explain," her companion shot back as she strode to the van.

"Listen." Dad held out his key ring. "Meet me back at my place." He smoothed my hair back and smiled sadly.

"You're — you're going with them?" I ignored the keys, remembering Sophocles and *Oedipus at Colonus*: "...something invisible and strange/ caught him up — or down — into a space unseen."

"I'm going with you." I gripped his sleeve.

"I won't be long." He put his hand on my shoulder. "Well, not too long."

I shook my head and refused to let go. "You're not leaving me behind. Not again. Not ever."

I don't know why I said it, but it worked. When the long-haired girl saw us both climbing into the back of the van she hissed out a profanity and turned to Koren. "This is too much!"

"You owe me this!" Dad pointed at her threateningly. "I got you in there with a minimum of subterfuge, which is what you wanted. And don't worry about either of us giving away your precious damn secrets. Who's going to believe a couple of fiction writers anyway?"

She rolled her eyes and fumed, but in the end took her seat behind the wheel. Koren sat next to her.

"We'll barely make it!" The long-haired girl started the van and pulled out so swiftly Dad and I were thrown in three directions at once. Several piles of amassed "stuff" in the storage area tipped over: books, movie reels, manuscripts, vinyl records, canvases loosely wrapped in brown paper. Some of the names on these things were unfamiliar to me. Others were all too famous — as the subjects of dreams and speculations: an eleventh Mahler symphony; a very thick edition of *The Last Tycoon*; a film case marked *Something's Got to Give* —

"Leave that alone!" The long-haired girl scowled at me through the rear-view.

I sat back just as the van made another sharp turn onto Howard Street, where we really began to pick up speed.

"They've been busy, haven't they?" Dad glanced back into the storage area.

"How did this stuff *get* here?"

He shrugged. "They probably wouldn't mind knowing that themselves." His voice was just above a whisper. "From what I gather, someone or something has been throwing these things into different probabilities all over the place. The job of these girls is to track it all down and return it to the universe it came from. Sort of a 'paradox conservation.'"

"They're just kids," I whispered.

"I wouldn't say just." I looked at the *Voyageur's* dashboard. I'm used to illuminated controls and digitized readouts, but never before had I seen so many in one place, and never with such unfathomable functions, like one with a yellow grid on which red and green wave lines wobbled over each other in a sort of strange tango.

The *Voyageur* rolled down Howard Street as if that bumpy, potholed mess had become a clean steel trackway. There was no way for me to tell which of those glowing readouts was the speedometer, but I knew we weren't moving anywhere near the posted limits.

"I think you missed that red light," I said.

No answer. Before I could repeat my observation we shot through another one.

Koren looked over the back of her seat. "Let me explain one more time: we're going to a very remote place. There's nothing else around it for at least two miles. A man of your age, in your condition — "

"Few things give me chest pains, Koren," he replied in full voice, "at my age, *in my condition*: bad art, deliberate cruelty, and people who worry about my health."

She turned back in her seat and said nothing more on the matter.

The *Voyageur* turned onto Central and from Central to Oakton, at no time dropping speed. The play between streetlights and darkness took on a stroboscopic effect. Neon signs became gaudy smears of color. The farther out we went the darker the road became. Our headlights caught the bare tree branches, making them look like hairline fractures in the shell of night.

As to how we managed to continue this way without being pursued by the combined forces of several suburban police departments, I can only

defer to the girls with the gadgets and the cyber-dashboard.

We careened on into the patchy peripheries of the suburbs, where pockets of land had somehow been missed by developers, through areas so dark we may as well have been traveling through a tunnel, or the depths of space, or along the track of a particle accelerator. Light itself huffed and puffed behind us, and ahead of us was nothing but the target with which we were destined to collide. Dad may not have been suffering chest pains, but my palpitations were growing audible.

"Tell me one thing, Koren," Dad said, "since all your inquiries about me seemed sincere: your interest in coming here wasn't just to retrieve these misplaced artifacts, was it?"

She smiled as if she had expected to be caught with this question eventually.

"You came looking for some answers. Answers that, for whatever reason, you couldn't find in your own probability."

She nodded with the slightest movement of her chin.

"And what answer did you find?"

"I found this." She held up the novel of Dad's she had borrowed, opened it, pointed her computer book light at one page and read aloud: "'Forget recording,' Gideon told her. 'Even the best recording by the best artist is ephemeral. The record saves the performance, which is all well and good, but the score saves the music. And it's the music that matters.'"

He looked surprised but not entirely displeased to hear his own words, written more than two decades before, read back to him. "And what does that passage mean to you?"

"It means that whatever you do, in whatever probability you exist — or existed — you can't help being an *auteur*, even when the budget stinks, the producer's a moron and all your allies are far away." She closed the book and handed it back to him. "Thanks."

"Keep it."

"I can't." She smiled shyly. If there had been more light in the van I might have seen her blush. "You know why."

Dad tried to look impassive, but he's always been completely transparent. He looked straight through the darkness to whatever, if anything, lay beyond it. I took his hand and for once he gripped mine as if he were in greater need of my assurance than I of his.

I was still thinking: "Something invisible and strange / caught him up — or down."

"Don't go," I whispered, the last word catching in my throat.

He looked at me as if I had said something silly and endearing. "Cath, I haven't the —"

The van decelerated just enough to press us back against our seats and allow our driver to execute a sharp right turn onto a vestige of an old gravel road that had once been closed off by a chain tied to two posts. The chain was rusted and in pieces; the posts were weathered stumps. Much of the gravel had sunken into the dirt and clay or was covered with dead weeds and grass.

A waning moon found its way through the cloud cover as we rolled much more slowly over this ghost-road, past a bizarre Boot Hill of dead refrigerators, stoves and washing machines. The gravel and weeds led to an upgrade, at the top of which was stationed a cinder block shed with boarded-up windows and doors, layers of graffiti covering every inch of its surface. Next to it were what must have been the remains of a larger building, barely a pile of bricks, and a foundation obscured in winter-dried undergrowth. Beyond these ruins was a gently downsloped field of ruined macadam and sere brush that ended at the stark steel skeleton of some tall, wide, flat structure, like a monstrous billboard —

— or a movie screen.

"An abandoned drive-in," Dad said. "Why not?"

The *Voyageur* came to a halt. Koren handed us each several eyeglass-shaped pieces of polarized film — eyeguards — the sort you have to wear when the optometrist puts those nasty drops in your eyes.

"You'll need these. They're not as good as what we make where Antonia and I come from, but we can't leave anything of ours behind." Antonia was already strapping on what looked like the sort of heavy-duty goggles a barnstorming aviator might wear, except that the lenses were solid black. "Wear them all, one over the other. Try not to look directly at the gate when it opens."

"Gate?" I looked at the eyeguards in my hand. "You're kidding! We won't be able to see a thing!"

Koren strapped on her pair of goggles. "Trust me." She leaned over and opened the side door. "I suggest you get behind those ruins."

Only when Dad indicated he was getting out with me did I step down into the cold night, holding him by the arm.

"Be careful, you two," Antonia said — the only sympathetic words I ever heard from her.

"It's been an honor, Mr. Ulaszek."

"Koren, you're a good kid." He patted her shoulder.

He still had one foot in the van when Koren stretched back and kissed him on the cheek. He has that effect on people. When he stepped out, the door shut firmly.

"Dammit," I said. "I forgot to ask her what H.E.L. stands for!"

The *Voyageur* rolled on toward the skeleton screen. Dad gave them a final wave as I nudged him toward the cinder block ruins. It was hard enough to see in the dark, with the rough terrain, and utter madness to put on the eyeguards. I looked all around, expecting something wild and frightening to reach out and snatch my father from me — into a space unseen." I pushed harder, until he almost lost his footing.

"Cath, what in the — "

The air split with a roar like a thousand revving jet engines.

It was accompanied by the sun, making a surprise guest appearance about twenty yards in front of the old screen.

We couldn't get the eyeguards on fast enough. I thought it was some horrible atom bomb explosion and in the next instant we would be vapor, except that if it *were* a bomb I would have been vapor long before I could have formed the thought. There was no accompanying heat. No flying debris. A rectangle bright as blazing magnesium stood suspended before the old screen like the ghost of every frame of every film that had ever shown there.

And into that frame of overpowering light rode the *Voyageur*.

I pushed Dad down and dropped down myself, gravel biting into my knees. I clung to him, half to protect him and half for protection. I couldn't feel him breathing, which frightened me, until I realized that I wasn't breathing either.

The light and roar continued for half a minute, then cut off as abruptly as it began. Dad and I rose, pulling off our eyeguards and grunting like a couple of sea lions.

When the ringing in my ears faded away, I heard Dad say, as he stared

out toward the ruined screen, "Thank you, God. I can die now."

Then to me: "Loosen up, Cath. I don't mean *at this moment*."

I was on the verge of squeezing him to death, and eased my grip considerably. "Ss-sorry. It's just — I thought that — you might — "

"No," he whispered, smoothing my hair. "I *couldn't* leave any of you. *This* is my world, for better or worse. I just wanted to see, with my own old, cynical eyes, what I've believed as a storyteller all these years."

I felt his frail form, the steadiness of his breathing, then looked around at our desolate surroundings, darker than ever after the intense barrage of light we'd just witnessed. The moon, in contrast, seemed no more than a tarnished coin.

"Oh shit, Dad. Have *we* got a hell of a way to go to get to a phone."

Dad walked the three or so miles without complaint. On the way, he told me that what Koren said about him was true for me too. "For better or worse, Cath."

"At this moment," I said, cold, hungry, exhausted, feeling every pebble on the shoulder through the soles of my shoes, "don't ask me which I think it is."

We called Richard from an all-night gas station in Des Plaines. While we waited, we bought some scorched coffee in the minimart and a pack of forbidden. We stood outside, smoking and looking up at the unruly April clouds, their bellies illuminated by the great metropolis below and their heads outlined by the steadfast moon.

"I wonder," Dad said, "how many probabilities have a moon, and in what phases are they now?"

"And which ones," I added, "have cloudy nights, or rain, or snow. Which ones have minimarts with bad coffee and stale donuts? Which heroes soar on the covers of their comic books? How many of them chase after dreams, visions, ideas?"

"There are moments," he flicked away the forbidden and filled his lungs with the cool night air, "when it's all there. When you can see and hear all those things in all those worlds as clearly as you can hear the piano notes from the little girl practicing her scales across the courtyard."

The attendant in the minimart told us about the "big light out west"

he saw. He thought it might have been a blown power transformer or a UFO.

When Richard finally arrived, he said, "I am waiting to hear one hell of a story from you guys."

Unfortunately, we had to defer on that request until later.

Dad's little dead end block was in a commotion when we returned. Two squad cars and an ambulance were parked down by the townhouses. The sidewalk was thick with gawkers, banded into several muttering conferences as they stared at Boyle's place.

From our experience at Boyle's earlier that evening, what the neighbors told us and a few things Dad picked up later on, we pieced together what had happened.

When Boyle came out of his daze, he quickly discovered that his "recent acquisitions" were gone — replaced with reels of Army documentaries on the making of asphalt. Then he discovered that every tape in his basement was erased (Koren's cricket was a powerful little beast indeed). He flew into a fury and made for the door to pursue the thieves, only to discover that the security locks no longer recognized his access code. In an insane rage, he ripped the door off its hinges, setting off his own alarms, and rolled out into the gangway, hurling curses in all directions. This provoked a number of calls to 911, and Boyle made it halfway down the block before old Mr. Feldman, out walking his sheltie, pointed out to him that he was standing on his own two, ample legs.

When Stacy returned from work, she flat-out fainted. The ambulance was for her.

We walked Dad to his door as the flashing lights danced in irregular patterns on the walls of his building.

"You *knew* what was going on right from the start. How?" I tucked the end of his scarf back into his jacket.

He mussed up my hair and smiled. "I just did what you did. I followed the story. All I know is stories. It may not be right, but it's all I know." He turned to Richard. "Does that make me a Platonist or an Aristotelian?"

"It makes you a national treasure." Richard hugged him.

"He's right," I said. "It enrages me, how little recognition you've gotten. I want to see you honored in the way you deserve."

"I am." He put an arm around each of us. "You don't know how honored I feel right now."

I gave him the same sort of fleeting kiss Koren had given him a few hours before.

He has that effect on people.

SOON, I WAS BACK in the routine, leading discussions, grading papers, holding conferences, scribbling my poems, drinking too much coffee.

The last I heard of Terry Boyle, he was distributing Christian videos.

The student production of *Colonus* went on. The people who saw it liked it, though the auditorium was never full. A critic for one of the university papers liked the idea of placing the chorus in the audience, "like spectators at a sports event, spurring the players on. Some of the theatergoers joined in with them when they hissed Creon." She called it, "a neat bit of staging."

Near the end of the term I received another little boost. A friend in the French department showed me a copy of the latest *Positif*. In it was an article, "*Les rédemptions improbables des Andrew Ulaszek*," strewn with inaccuracies but quite laudatory. The opening paragraph mentioned that the *Cinémathèque française* was assembling a retrospective of his films.

Jon was right, I thought. He'll outlive that third doctor. In some ways he'll outlive all of us, even if my life ever straightens out.

But the article that really caught my attention in that issue of *Positif* concerned a storm brewing over the authenticity of an alleged "complete" version of Erich von Stroheim's *Greed*, recently discovered in the attic of an old building on the *rue Désirée*. Apparently, even the defenders of the print's authenticity are at a loss to explain why the woman playing Trina in the film in no way resembles Zasu Pitts.

Wasn't it Napoléon who said, "*'Impossible' n'est pas français*"?

It doesn't matter. I happen to know that Koren Hume speaks impeccable French.





BOOKS TO LOOK FOR

CHARLES DE LINT

Fear Nothing, by Dean Koontz,
Bantam, 1998, \$26.95

MOVING TO A new publisher appears to have invigorated Dean Koontz so much that he's produced an incredibly strong novel, one that easily ranks with my earlier favorites of his such as *Watchers*, *Lightning*, and *Ticktock*. To be honest, I wasn't planning to review another of his books in this column because I've already discussed his work a number of times in the past and it's not like he needs the publicity. But this one's too good to pass by without a few words.

As one might expect, *Fear Nothing* mixes genres shamelessly. It's part suspense/mystery, part sf, part thriller, and even part fantasy (though I mention the latter only in terms of a sensibility that infuses certain scenes; Koontz plays with plausible speculations, as does the best sf). It's also, if not the first,

then the first of his novels in a long time to be told from a first-person perspective, which brings an additional immediacy to the proceedings. Considering that the whole book, except for the last few pages, takes place over the span of one night, immediacy is what this novel is all about.

The viewpoint character is Chris Snow who has xeroderma pigmentosum — a rare, and usually fatal, genetic disorder. No more than brief exposure to sunlight, or even most interior lighting, can cause irreparable damage leading to blindness and fatal skin cancers. So Snow lives his life like the proverbial vampire: he only comes out at night.

Now this alone would make for a fascinating character study and the complications of Snow's life could fill a book on their own, but naturally, Koontz doesn't leave it at that. The novel opens with the death of Snow's father, a tragic, but seemingly innocent incident that tears open the fabric of Snow's life.

He soon becomes embroiled in a conspiracy that seems to involve everyone in the small town of Moonlight Bay where Snow has spent his entire life.

I don't want to go too much into the plot for fear of spoiling surprises for you, but I will say that Koontz has created a fascinating, if dangerous, puzzle with an even more fascinating resolution here. There's not a dull moment in the book, but the quick pace of the plot still allows room for thoughtful speculations and wonderful characterizations, and the prose is some of Koontz's best to date.

I've heard that this is the first of a three-book series, featuring a continuing cast of characters — another first for Koontz. Longtime readers of this column will know by now my less than enthusiastic response to trilogies and series books, but so far Koontz is doing it right. *Fear Nothing* closes the way a novel should, leaving the reader satisfied with a complete story, well-told. But in this case, we're also going to have the chance to find out what happened next. I'll admit to nervousness as to whether the second book will add or detract from this novel. We'll just have to wait to find out if Koontz can hit another home run his second time

up to bat with this cast of characters.

The Tooth Fairy, by Graham Joyce, Tor, 1998, \$22.95

It's easy to see why this book won the British Fantasy Award last year in London for the UK Signet Books edition. *The Tooth Fairy* is one of those near-perfect novels that grabs you from the first page and doesn't let go until the last sentence, a seamless journey through the growing pains of three young English boys and the one main girl in their lives. Joyce captures all the miserable angst and profound joys of childhood with these characters: The bonding, and eventual drifting apart of their tightknit camaraderie. The first loves, and lost loves. The ways in which minor events can be exaggerated out of all proportion, while major events are at once catastrophic and then dismissed.

I can't be certain here, but I think this might be a boy's book. The female characters, while important in how they impinge upon the boys' lives, remain mostly on the periphery. Women might be interested in taking a peek inside the twisted little brains of these boys, but it's the men who will recognize themselves, or their

friends at that age, in these pages. They're not necessarily likable all the time, but then who of us were?

All of which makes for fascinating reading, but the real kicker is the presence of the title character. Early in the book, one of the boys loses a tooth in a minor scuffle. His friends convince Sam not to tell his parents, but to put it under his pillow to see what happens. Well, sure enough the tooth fairy appears, but she/he is nothing like either Sam or the readers expect. Tormentor, seducer, enemy, friend. From that point on, the tooth fairy's existence weaves in and out of the more mundane aspects of Sam's life, as well as the lives of his friends, to great and fascinating effect.

In the tooth fairy, Joyce has created a truly original creature of the otherworld — an enigmatic being of rags and light that is at once terrifying and pitiable — adding a dark undercurrent to his otherwise realistic portrayal of adolescence.

I have to admit that, outside the occasional deliberate foray into YA books, I don't usually seek out novels that are solely centered around juvenile characters — perhaps because I've grown too far from that part of my own life and am more interested in reading about my present contemporaries. But I

found *The Tooth Fairy* utterly riveting and can readily recommend it to anyone who doesn't mind returning, if only vicariously, to that emotionally charged time in their lives.

Kissing the Beehive, by Jonathan Carroll, Nan A. Talese/Doubleday, 1998, \$22.95

I'll admit straight off the top that Carroll's new novel really has no place in this column except for the fact that its author is well-known to many of us as one of the finest practitioners of contemporary fantasy. *Kissing the Beehive* is a straightforward mystery/thriller, but it's written in Carroll's gorgeous prose, and it contains all those odd viewpoints and ways of looking at the world that are so familiar to us from his fantasies. And like the two books discussed above, it doesn't ring one false note.

The plot is rather simple and not terribly inventive: A best-selling author with writer's block regains his ability to put words to paper when he decides to chronicle the one big event of his childhood: his discovery of a dead woman floating in a river. Complicating matters is the entrance into his life of one of those proverbial "I'm your

biggest fan" types that we've already met before in books like Stephen King's *Misery*.

But Carroll isn't one to repeat what another writer's already done and his take on both is original and will keep the reader guessing until the end. More to the point, this is Carroll writing. His insights into what makes people tick and his slightly askew vision of the world, as well as his already-mentioned gift for superb prose, make this a novel that will enthrall old fans and win him new ones. And for those who feel that they might miss that

fantastical element from his other books, I didn't even realize it wasn't a fantasy until a few days after I'd finished the book and had sat down to write about it. I don't think you'll miss it either.

Material to be considered for review in this column should be sent to Charles de Lint, P.O. Box 9480, Ottawa, Ontario, Canada K1G 3V2. ☞

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MUSING ON BOOKS

MICHELLE WEST

The Night Watch, by Sean Stewart, Ace Books, 1997, \$21.95

Children of God, by Mary Doria Russell, Villard, 1998, \$23.95

In the Land of Winter, by Richard Grant, Avon, 1997, \$24.00

I HAVE BEEN told, about a hundred times in the last six weeks, that women's brains *actually* shrink during pregnancy — and while oddly enough, not one of those cheerful information gatherers was either a) a woman or b) pregnant, I wouldn't argue with the practical effects of the preliminary scientific findings.

Normally this means that I would read things that are lighter in tone but it just happened that, while I started about ten different books for this column, I ended up finishing less than half, and not a single one of them is lovely, pure fluff. These three novels are all damn good and they speak to some essential me, shrunken-brain or no.

The Night Watch by Sean Stewart, is probably the only one of these books that has complete two-level readability. You can read it without reflective thought at all, and indeed it moves so quickly, turns corners at such breakneck speed, and stops so rarely that thought comes only after the book is over when you can draw breath again. I wouldn't hesitate to recommend this book to an audience who is looking for a grand adventure in a world not-quite-ours, where magic has taken hold, sunk roots — and, like any seasonal thing, finally begun its slow decline.

Stewart, as far as I can tell, never repeats himself; he always tries something different with everything he writes. *Nobody's Son* is a lovely novel, a comfort book that takes a sweet and serious look at the happily ever after of a farm-boy hero who, in defeating great danger, is given the hand of someone who wasn't raised to marry a farm boy. *Passion Play* is a cyber-murder mystery with an evocative, dark

religious riff playing throughout in the background. *Resurrection Man* is about Angels in the old and terrible sense of the word; things of danger, of mystery, and of very little humanity — a return of the wilderness and the awe that is magic to, well, a much more recognizable world. *Clouds End* is probably the most true coming of age novel I've ever read in that it delves into the reality of life, the gray drudgery, the responsibility and the weight of the daily, *after* the great magical quest, the great deed; it looks at the cost of being a hero, at the cost of the romantic, at the desire, (and we all have it) for youthful triumph — and it returns reality and hope. It's the antithesis of *Nobody's Son* in tone and texture, but you have to love them both.

I mention these because I think that Stewart should be read, and because, having read him, there are threads that run throughout his work that ground them firmly for me. He makes no secret that he was inspired by, moved by, even changed by, reading Tolkien as a youth (as so many of us were). I see little of Tolkien at all in the work itself — at least little of the obvious trappings; elves, orcs, and wizards don't jibe with Stewart's earthbound vision, nor do the broad views of "good" or "evil."

But the sense of responsibility, of the sacrifice that comes out of a love that can be pushed to transcend all fear, the deeper understanding of the enduring, harsh beauty of duty — and of duty's underside — which spoke to *me* so strongly in Tolkien's opus — speaks just as strongly in Stewart's novels, filtered through things more human, less mythic. Good isn't taking up the big sword and killing someone else; it isn't being pointed in a random direction and fired, willy-nilly and ignorant. It's the painstaking care of the trusts that are left you: Your children, for instance. Your people. Stewart illuminates parts of the human condition that rise above — or fall below — the standard of "good" and "evil": the desire for love, the desire for something *other* than the duty that drives you, that devours your life; talent, magic, awe, inspiration.

In 2074, the world has been transformed by a magic that has little obvious rhyme or reason. Edmonton is one of the few cities that has managed to retain — and develop — its understanding of technology, somehow turning back the tide of the change that has swamped so much else, and at that, only the South side of the city; the North is lost to impenetrable magic.

Although Emily Thompson is, arguably, the novel's chief protagonist, it is her grandfather Winter, the old man who rules the Southside of Edmonton, who balances her. Winter, who has ruled her life, and the half-city of his adult life, with an unswerving devotion that is nonetheless ice and snow in its coldness and its clarity, finally tells her what she perceives to be the truth about Southside's freedom from the excess and the wildness of the magic that has swept across North American cities, devouring lives and buildings in its wake:

That he sacrificed, that he cut out, the Angel within him, the voice that drove him to magic's edge, and might have driven him away from the responsibility to a city full of people, most of whom were possessed of no such gift. That he made a deal with the wildness and the darkness of the Northside, bound it up across a single thin bridge, that he offered magic's children to magic, asking each and every child born to the Southside to walk the bridge, and those who were called were to be given to Northside should they choose to complete the long walk over that bridge. It's not until the end of the book that one understands fully what the bargain was, what two halves of a man — the physical and the numinous — ac-

complished in two halves of a magic-riven modern city.

Emily is horrified, and her grandfather, Winter, tired, he has borne the burden of isolation and loss all of his adult life, taken the cold and chill, removed himself from the magic to which he was born, for the safety of his people. There is no question that the sacrifice saved the Southside. And no question that the sacrifice is meant to continue, that it is meant to be borne by the next generation.

Stewart is tricky here. Winter is admirable, and for just a moment, on the reader's edge of horrified admiration and just plain horror, Emily seems young and callow, selfish in a way that her grandfather chose not to be. But it is just a minute—because the world is shifting and changing, because the threat of an older generation is not the threat that faces the younger. Emily flees.

It is in Vancouver, and not in the Southside, that the tale is played out almost to its end — there is the Edmonton bridge, and it needs, textually and metaphorically, to be walked. But the cast of west coast characters widens to encompass Li Mei, the daughter of a powerful and well-respected diplomat who steps in Winter's path at the wrong moment, and Water Spider, a man who

comes to realize that politics and the prize they bring don't, in fact, provide what he wants from life; Raining the talented amateur painter, whose marriage was taken from her by the bridge, when her Southside husband chose to offer his child to the Northside to see if magic would call her.

In fact, there's so much to this rich, deft book that it would probably take me just as long to summarize as it would for you to read it. If you paint at all, if you have an understanding of the visual medium, there's a wealth of material here I haven't begun to cover. I would have liked to see two of the many subplots lengthened to give them more resonance, but that's a minor quibble.

Children of God is no less ambiguous and no less moral a work. It begins where Russell's first novel, *The Sparrow*, left off: with Emilio Sandoz returned from the planet Rakhat and dangling by the fine, fine strand of mangled faith and pain that religious belief can inspire in very dark times. I found the beginning of the book a bit forced — but this could be just me; Russell states baldly what was uncovered so painstakingly and so marvelously slowly by the whole of the first novel. It took me a while to find my

feet after that, but when I did — about a quarter of the way through the book, I didn't lose them again.

Russell's narrative voice seems best served by the lovely rhythm of the interchange between the past and the present; it is when she goes from the now of the unfolding, immediate story, to the now of the parlor, where older and wiser survivors can think and deliberate on events that have gentled and perhaps changed in memory, that the book starts to sing. I don't know any other writer of whom this is so true, and I wonder if it's true only because of the nature of the conflict that she's chosen; I'm definitely looking forward to her next novel (which I assume will be written and which probably won't be about Sandoz). But I digress.

Emilio Sandoz has journeyed to Rakhat before, to confirm his belief in the existence of God — and to shatter it — in the author's first novel, *The Sparrow*. Russell spares him nothing in this novel; the question of faith is never completely settled, and it won't be until Sandoz faces Rakhat again.

It's the nature of the conflict that makes this book what it is: the desire for faith and the terrible sense of betrayal when faith alone — when being, if you will, the chosen one, the good man or woman — is sim-

ply not enough to protect you. This sounds too simple on the surface of things; what makes the book interesting is that it continues with the religious theme in a way that I think only Russell could. The author bio makes clear that Russell, raised Catholic, converted to Judaism. She offers no rant against the religion of her childhood, but instead turns the planet of Rakhat into an almost-Israel. Sofia Mendes, we quickly discover, survived the disaster described in *The Sparrow*. Half-blinded, widowed, and alone, she is adopted by the People, and she gives them her religion and her sense, her angry, desperate, sense of a Justice they have never known and never taken it upon themselves to demand. She also offers them her technical expertise, and through her inspiration, a war starts. A war ends.

It is not the war itself that Russell focuses on; it's in the reversal of the fortunes of the ruling class. From predator to hunted, from dominance to less than subservience, the carnivores are driven into subsistence and near extinction.

And it is into this world that Father Emilio Sandoz eventually — and tragically — returns, against his will, to face God a last time. And he finds Sofia, the war, the tragedy of the few survivors; sees his enemies and his betrayers under

heel, and finds it in himself, if not to forgive, then at least to accept, the awful grace of God's will.

Russell doesn't judge *anyone*. It can be argued that Hlavim, the ruling carnivore and the creature whose violence almost destroyed Emilio Sandoz, is a depraved and an evil individual — his actions could easily bear that label. But Russell goes beyond that, sees the source of his evil without apologizing for it, gives us the sense of a life in balance. Over and over again, she both justifies war and accuses it, balancing, making no decision for us. In the end, when she offers us peace, there's a sense that tragedy waits in the wings, because both the good and the bad come out of the decision of individuals, none of whom can predict the effect they'll have.

There is no blind faith in her book; none. There is the faith that can stop and see magic in the movement of a symphony written by an autistic boy on an alien world; that can see, in its beauty and starkness, not a benevolent god, but a god nonetheless, a moment of definition that will neither rob us of our humanity or our responsibility to struggle, always, with the concept of right and wrong.

Richard Grant's *In the Land of Winter*, by comparison, is a fairy

tales of a novel; something with roots in the darkness and petals in the light. It is a coming of age story (of a sort), about a woman named Pippa Rede who professes to be a witch — although it's perfectly clear that she could profess to be almost anything at all. There is a passive quality to her that says, "blank slate."

Into her life daughter Winterbelle was born, and it's with Winterbelle that Pippa seems to come to life; there's a warmth of activity and movement, of real interaction, that comes through nowhere else in her tentative existence. Quiet, gentle, unassuming, she basks in the glow of her daughter's more earthbound, self-confident youth.

But evil comes, as it has a way of doing, into the life of the fairy tale heroine. And although she's a single mother earning little as a retail clerk at a florist's, she *is* the fairy tale heroine. And we know what that means. Instead of being taken from the world by great evil, the world is taken from her. She wanders through it in a helpless, passive daze, as the great evil — in this case religious fundamentalist intolerants who can't stand the idea that Pippa calls herself a witch — does more and more damage. I would have found this phase of the story acutely intolerable but for one thing:

Grant's *writing*. His phrasing, the tenor of the language, the small but completely apt descriptions, the dance of words across the interior landscape of Pippa's Winter life — they're luminous. They glow. If one reads just for story though, one would be frustrated, so be warned.

Fairy tale though it is, this book is a modern tale; the princess isn't awakened by a kiss from a prince. No; it takes the desperation of a lost child — her own — to kick her into gear. Once she starts her slow, choppy movements, once she steps foot on the path, she's halfway to magic, where magic in the real world is, one can suppose, not aggression so much as the active principle. It's not enough to be quiet and unassuming; one *must* assume one's real self.

Pippa does; not coincidentally meeting a wolf, a very wise woman, a man named Spear, a would-be rescuer who calls himself Glyph, and a young prince who does — sort of — save an important frog.

This is both gentler than Russell's novel and harsher; gentler in theme and scope; harsher in judgment. But Grant's stereotyping of the great evils in middle American society is made acceptable by the form of the novel he's chosen to write; it's part of the essence of this particular, magical tale. ♣

Harvey Jacobs worked for ABC Television Network for many years and scripted a number of documentaries for PBS, including Remembering Groucho. His funny 1980 novel The Juror has been under option for many years, and the rights to his most recent novel, American Goliath, were just snapped up by the folks who filmed Prizzi's Honor.

For all his vast behind-the-screen experience, however, it's clear that Harvey is a cineaste who loves the whole experience of going to the movies. In fact, he reports with dismay that some theaters have been trying recently to substitute Goobers with Planters or even peanut M&Ms. "While this may work for an audience raised on disposable diapers," says he, "it will never succeed with true cinephiles." Witness the case of one such man and how those delicious Goobers (a trademark item of the Nestle corporation, thank you very much) help change his life.

Goobers

By Harvey Jacobs

NESTOR FRIK PLAYED A GAME with himself. The object was to make his box of Goobers last. Through announcements about *no smoking*, courtesy to other

patrons, refreshments provided for your convenience, management's willingness to address complaint, and coming attractions. It was a tantalizing exercise in restraint.

The rules of the game required that he strip the cellophane from his Goobers box, rip a tiny window in the upper right corner and allow himself only two preliminary Goobers. He could savor the chocolate skin, then crunch on the peanuts hidden inside, or he could bite down and pulverize both Goobers instantly for the sudden delicious rush. But, until the feature, and only after opening titles ended, he was not to devour another Goober or even allow one to slip through the carton's exit into his hand.

Once the film began, there were no further restrictions. The game was over. He'd either won or lost. More often than not, Nestor lost. He finished his Goobers even before he learned the name of the writer or director. The first Goober set off such urgent greed, liberated so much desire, that he

usually gave up on will power and spilled the remaining Goobers, brown nuggets of pleasure, helter-skelter into his palm and shuttled them to his chocolate-craving, peanut-primed mouth.

He felt anger and guilt when he realized the box had emptied so quickly. A sudden flood of saliva splashed around his tongue. But so what? He never took the game too seriously. There were no other players to gloat. His sins were committed in the flickering theater dark. His Goobers game was not a matter of life or death. It was something he did, just silliness.

This time, though, he was doing well. The lights had long since faded, announcements and coming attractions played out, the feature begun and Nestor had his Goobers intact. He was pleased by the tiny victory. It balanced so many defeats.

The woman sitting next to him, a gross stranger, made wet sounds while she wolfed Raisinettes too quickly and too soon. Nestor never liked Raisinettes. They were too sweet, too yielding. A patron behind him spilled buttered popcorn, then crushed the lost kernels with a vindictive sneaker. The attraction of oily popcorn evaded Nestor. To each his own, still, the choice of Goobers said something about a person.

During the opening scene, the Raisinette woman threw her depleted box under her seat and shifted heavily from side to side. For the moment, Nestor controlled the arm rest that separated them. His Goobers were firmly under control. He could ration them in ones and twos or gulp a dozen.

He had all his options open. The woman knew it, the spiller behind him probably sensed it. Her candy was squandered, his wasted popcorn already turned to dander. Nestor settled into the comfortable theater seat and gently rattled his Goobers box, confirming its content, feeling its weight, taunting his shadowy neighbors. "Jesus," he thought, embarrassed by his own gloating, "Is everybody eight years old?"

The film he'd come to see, *Billy Eiffel*, had earned all kinds of praise. It was featured in the *Times' Arts and Leisure*, in *New York Magazine*, cherished by Siskel and Ebert who'd waved enthusiastic thumbs. Nestor knew it had something to do with a Native American living in Paris but he hadn't read beyond the headlines in the *Times* or *New York*, nor had he focused closely on the television pundits.

What really motivated him to see the movie was that, in addition to media raves, it had come up in two disparate conversations. One was with a client in Denver during a sales meeting, the other with Susan Acorn, a girl he knew from his building laundry and who was somehow involved with ballet.

Nestor was a curious man who recognized the importance of keeping alert to the cultural environment. The problem was, his work swallowed him up. It was the way of things at a time when the economy was suspect and competition increasingly vicious. Every sale took a major effort. There was no time to breathe.

So, he created a guideline. If a film, book, play, or even a song came to his attention three times, if it achieved *triangulation*, he made the time to find out about it firsthand.

Awareness of current "ins" was not only important socially, but for business. The client in Denver, for example, represented potential millions to his company and Nestor had to tell the man, "No, I haven't seen *Billy Eiffel*, though it is on my list." As for Susan Acorn, he sensed her displeasure even though their conversation took place between floors in an elevator. "Yes, I know it's playing over at the Quad, but I've been on the road more than I've been home the past month. So, is it as good as they say?"

If he'd been on firmer ground, who could say what might have followed. She brought up the subject, gave him the bait, and he spit it out. "When I have the chance to play catchup, I promise to see *Billy Eiffel* and we'll compare notes." But Susan Acorn was by nature a girl who made spontaneous judgments. Nestor saw her eyes go blank.

Of all the popular arts, films were certainly the most essential when it came to communication. They eclipsed even sports except during the World Series or the Superbowl. Nestor knew he should have seen *Billy Eiffel* because it was there and before it could be used against him.

And now he was about to see it. He let his mind dissolve like the Goober he tongued as he gave himself to the opening scene, a montage of Left Bank vignettes. The camera zoomed in on a beautiful young woman at a sidewalk café. She lifted an infant from a sack on her back, unbuttoned her blouse and began to nurse what must have been a symbolic papoose given the subject of the film (*probing, intense, a single parent you won't*

forget, a brilliant evocation of the impact of ethnic clash, a movie you can't afford to miss).

Nestor watched the baby suckle at a perfect breast. The woman's black hair cascaded over her huge, silent eyes. She had wonderful cheekbones and a straight, determined nose. Just as she began to hum a lullaby, the screen blotted out. Her tranquil image was replaced by the broad back and huge head of a man who flopped into the seat in front of Nestor's, probably the last free seat in that small theater.

Nestor flexed at the obstacle. He bent his own head far to the right until he was nearly cheek-to-cheek with the Raisinette lady who, in turn, shifted uncomfortably.

Nestor's new position was not only uncomfortable, it was pointless. The wall still blocked most of the screen. Nestor tried sitting taller but that was no better. The massive head in front of him was crowned with a burst of hair that grew in bristles like the foliage on a Chia Pet.

Nestor ate his Goobers, tried to make sense of the fractured picture and splintered English titles. He listened to floating French voices for some sense of continuity, but his efforts were futile. He might as well have been sitting with a bag over his head. Nestor remembered that, long ago, at summer camp, sadistic counsellors forced rebellious campers to watch the weekly movie facing backwards.

Fuming but inert, he stayed to the end, grasping what he could of *Billy Eiffel*. He pushed his way up the aisle when the film was done, trying to catch bits and pieces of audience reaction. The remarks he heard echoed the critics, *wonderful, fabulous, absolutely original*.

In the lobby he stopped to adjust his coat. He felt himself shoved aside. While he regained balance, Nestor realized that the person who'd nearly sent him sprawling was the same mountain that ruined his entertainment. The enormous whale of a man tried to cover his basketball head with a cap. "Piece of pretentious crap," the man muttered, "crock of pure shit. There is no way a streetwise Cherokee broad would take up with a Lautrec wannabe. No fucking way. Waste of time, waste of money."

Nestor followed him out into the street and watched him lumber toward Sixth Avenue. So the movie was a love story and the Native American decided to stay with the physically challenged Algerian artist. That explained some of what Nestor managed to see through the narrow

valley of vision. He ate his last Goober, then threw the box into a trash can and went home.

Some days later Nestor ran into Susan Acorn at their subway exit. They walked together making small talk about the weather, about life in New York, about nothing in particular. Then Nestor told her, "By the way, I managed to catch *Billy Eiffel*."

"Did you? What did you think?"

Nestor swallowed his spit. He knew how important his reply would be to the flow of their tenuous relationship. "It was interesting. A bit fragmented, but definitely worth seeing."

"You don't sound very enthusiastic."

"I had problems with it," Nestor said to his surprise. "I mean, it left me with a credibility gap. That such a girl, one might say an experienced girl from the reservation, would have no reservations about hitching her star to the fate of a handicapped artist..."

"What artist? You mean the bio-technician? I suppose you could call him an artist of sorts."

"The bio-technician, yes. He reminded me of Toulouse Lautrec."

"I can see that, yes. His mission was to create beauty and joy for others."

"Beauty and joy, yes. But to be honest, I've got to tell you that while I enjoyed segments, I found it a bit pretentious."

"Predictable, you're saying. I could agree with that. But the total impact?"

"Generally powerful. Credit where credit is due."

"I'm glad you felt that. Nestor, I wonder if you have time to stop up for a drink? I'll warn you, I'm a white wine and candles type of person."

"White wine and candles would be very welcome."

The next morning Nestor left Susan Acorn's studio and went downstairs to his own place. He showered, dressed and made himself a cup of decaf tea, then called his client in Denver. "Dave, I expected to catch your voice mail. What time is it out there? Dawn? What do you do, milk the cows?"

"Doesn't everybody? I've been going through your presentation."

"And?"

"It's close to the mark, Nestor. My reaction is positive."

"Good, Dave. By the way, last evening I got to see *Billy Eiffel*. That film you mentioned. And I want to thank you for nudging me to see it. Powerful stuff."

"That Indian maiden is some piece of ass. I never thought I'd want to change places with an Algerian dwarf."

"I know what you're saying. It's all in the genes, eh?"

"You think you can deliver at the price you quote?"

"Absolutely."

"Let me just run this past The Lone Ranger and see if we can move things along, good buddy."

"Great. We look forward to working with you guys. So, hang in there, Tonto."

"Yeah. Take care, kimosabe."

Some weeks later, when triangulation occurred for a film called *The Dead Soldier*, Nestor went to a late show at a theater on the Upper Eastside. Late or not, the film was a *must see*, so a long line snaked to the box office. Nestor got one of the last available tickets and was thankful to find a seat.

Fortunately, the person sitting in front of him was of normal size and dimension with a head no bigger than a cantaloupe. In the dash for seats there was no chance to stop for Goobers. By the time Nestor had his coat off, *The Dead Soldier* was already rolling the names of its stars.

Chet Trigarian played the lead, which meant *The Dead Soldier* was an action picture in English. It was exactly the kind of film Nestor felt like seeing, a no-nonsense, no brain, pure and simple entertainment. Susan Acorn once remarked that she could see a resemblance between Nestor and the macho Trigarian so he studied the actor's face with more than usual interest.

The first scene showed Trigarian as a flat-faced detective, stalking a small-time drug pusher through the hopeless streets of a gray city. As he closed on his prey, a gorgeous woman slammed a white Corvette around a corner. The car flattened the doomed hood, ripping into him with its bumper, then zoomed away like an angel with bloody lips.

Trigarian watched from the shadows with the expression of a man who has seen worse. But there was a glimmer of something like surprise. The cop knew who that woman was, and Nestor knew by the way

Trigarian scowled that there had once been something between them. Nestor suspected a flashback.

The woman in front of him began coughing uncontrollably. She stood, grabbed for her coat, and ran for the door, trailing gurgling sounds. Then the theater was quiet again except for a ripple of slow jazz from the soundtrack. The camera closed on Trigarian's dead eyes as, sure enough, his mind took him back to another time, another place where...

Nestor couldn't know to what time or place Trigarian was taken because he was distracted by a plodding figure moving down the carpeted aisle. The large shape dropped into the vacated seat with the thud of a suicide hitting pavement.

It was the same man who'd thwarted Nestor's full appreciation of *Billy Eiffel*. There was the avocado body, the swollen head and the tangled tendrils of hair pushing out from under that stupid cap.

Without even the consolation of Goobers, Nestor felt his rage crest, then curdle into a belly ache. He could hear Trigarian whispering to the homicidal girl but he couldn't concentrate on the words. *Once* Nestor could accept as an annoyance. *Twice*, considering the odds, the number of films in New York, the number of theaters, the number of seats, the number of hours and days — *twice* passed coincidence and verged on insult.

But, like the first time, there was nothing much Nestor could do. The screen had clearly announced that *no standing room* was permitted because of the *fire code*, and the place was jammed.

He lasted out the film, gluing sounds and sentences together like puzzle pieces, trying to fathom the plot. Trigarian had known the girl when both were young and vulnerable to dreams. They'd been separated by circumstance; he'd gone to Vietnam and returned convinced he was really dead. The irony was, the girl had assumed his death and, after years of grieving, began a series of ugly relationships with men chosen to give her pain, and more pain.

Now she was the rich widow of a kinky industrialist, evolved into a self-styled vigilante bitch. She was respectable by day but used her nights to snuff out evil wherever she saw it wearing pants. Bottom line, she was a serial killer and he was a cop, a serious, dedicated cop rigidly pledged to duty.

When the lights came up, Nestor rose to leave and was dumped backward by the gross obstacle who was already vertical and moving. Nestor was about to protest when he saw that the lump spotted a familiar face and rushed toward a woman who seemed glad to see him. They exchanged pecks on the cheek. Nestor heard her ask him what he thought of the film and he offered to tell her over coffee.

Nestor followed them to a luncheonette on the corner. They took the last unoccupied booth, but there was room at the counter. Nestor squatted on a stool, ordered a Sprite, and kept his ears open. He didn't have to strain. The man proclaimed his opinions.

"It was a perfect vehicle for Trigarian," the woman said.

"I suppose so," the fat face howled. "Accepting that Trigarian is an advertisement for terminal constipation. And the *chutzpa*, giving it a happy ending. Resurrection of the zombies. Come on."

"You want to nit-pick, go ahead. But I believed the story and I certainly believed him. How could he have sent her away for life or a lethal injection."

"So instead he sentences her to a life with him and a series of lethal injections. Please. I suppose it was clever enough. I mean, updating *The Maltese Falcon* for the age of enlightenment."

"I see what you mean. You're right, as usual. On the other hand, injection by Trigarian wouldn't be the worst punishment."

"If the movie left you in heat, maybe we should wander up to your place," the glob said loudly enough to turn heads.

"If you'd like."

Nestor spilled his Sprite. The vision of that garbage bag naked and thrusting, huffing and puffing, was too much. He apologized to the waitress and helped blot his spill with a napkin. When Nestor looked up, the couple was already gone.

"I'm glad I'm not the poor bastard manning the Richter Scale tonight," he said to the waitress who smiled and nodded. She couldn't speak much English but she saw that he'd left a dollar tip. Nestor thought of calling Susan Acorn but remembered she was out of town for a recital.

"So you caught *The Dead Soldier*," his boss said while they pissed side by side after a meeting. "Trigarian. I like that guy. He's a walking dick. How'd you like it?"

"Interesting. Entertaining. I guess they were updating the Bogie flick, what was it, not *Casablanca*, *The Maltese Falcon*."

"The one about the bird? What has that got to do with this?"

"Not much. Not really. Just riffing. Bogie turns in Mary Astor, remember? He does what he has to do by 1940 standards. Trigarian doesn't turn the killer in, he turns her over. New family values."

"You blame him, Nestor? What should he do, let them cook her? What a waste. I wasn't in 'Nam but I knew guys with those fried egg eyes. Dead soldiers. I could see him thawing out. I could see him forgiving her. Considering. I loved that movie. Maybe you're too damn critical for your own good."

"Did I say I didn't like the movie? I liked it," Nestor said.

"We've got to get down to the World Financial Center in a half-hour. You pissed enough. What have you got, diabetes?"

"It was a good, solid movie," Nestor said, zipping. "I'd give it three stars."

"That's nice of you," his boss said. "Who made you God?"

Nothing else triangulated for a month, not until Nestor heard a flight attendant enthuse about *Polly Valentine*, a film Susan raved about when she got back to New York. Then he heard *Polly Valentine's* director interviewed by Charlie Rose on PBS. "I think it's the first animated *film noir* ever made," the director said. "And I'm not amazed that the intellectuals embraced it. Maybe a little amazed. Not a lot amazed. I was dealing with universal themes here and I know how much of vintage sweat I put into those frames."

Nestor picked a theater far from his neighborhood for a Saturday matinee. The theater was crowded with ancients. A sign outside invited seniors in for only two dollars.

This time he sat in the front row, trading eye strain for vista. He ate his Goobers without even the pretense of struggle while he watched the overture of advertisements, a trivia quiz, and clips from next week's bill.

His mind replayed the humiliating scene in the men's room. His boss had made several snide references to Nestor's remarks about *The Dead Soldier*, smug barbs. Nestor had only himself to blame. He wondered why he had listened, much less repeated, comments by that horny tub of feces,

that barrage balloon, that luncheonette lothario whose only purpose was to dilate a middle-aged vagina.

No question, the exchange with his boss, however innocent, had done him corporate harm. There is something about mutuality of movie taste, shared celluloid pleasure, that cements like nothing else. Conversely, opposition is implicit aggression and not easily forgiven. Nestor had shot himself in the leg but the wound would heal. It could take years.

Nestor dumped a dozen Goobers into his mouth and quickly knew something was very wrong. The Goobers tasted like chalk. He herded the residue in his mouth, careful not to swallow any more of the paste than he had.

The occupants of the first row were standing, brushing themselves, muttering curses. A snow of white plaster fell slowly from the high ceiling. An usher ran to lead the displaced through white mist while patrons in other rows laughed. "The management is deeply sorry for this inconvenience. You'll all be given a complimentary pass good for a future presentation. The thing is, workers are doing some repairs on our roof. It won't happen again. Please find alternative seats. Our feature is about to begin."

Nestor spit the tainted clot of Goobers into his handkerchief and rolled it into a ball. "What happens if I get sick?" he said to the usher.

"There's an empty seat for you, sir. Three in on the left."

"Not there," Nestor said, "no, please," but he was *shushed* by the impatient crowd around him. He already knew who would be entrenched in the seat in front of *three in on the left*. He didn't even bother to look.

For the first ten minutes of *Polly Valentine* Nestor kept his eyes shut and concentrated on what Goobers were left safe in their box. Finally, he opened his eyes to the fleshy curtain that obliterated most of the screen.

Above, and on each side of that bulbous head, through those tufts of brillo hair, Nestor saw cheerful flashes of brilliant color even as he heard the soundtrack shriek. The director had been correct, the audience was entranced.

Polly Valentine was a farm girl from New Hampshire chosen as the annual virgin sacrifice offered to some unknown force during Summer Solstice. Ordinary citizens orchestrated her fate. The ceremony was a well-kept local secret, nothing for tourists to know about. There was a

mansion outside the charming village with a history no one dared probe. The place reeked of unnatural death. And that was to be the place of *Polly's* penetration. She was a curious mix of innocence and materialism, a willing co-conspirator, eager to confront whatever darkness lurked in that cursed house, convinced she could turn it to a profit.

Nestor ate his Goobers and thought about what the obstacle must be thinking. "*Beauty And The Beast* meets the Home Shopping Network. There is a visual poetry in the special effects but it all adds up to a soggy comic book. Animated horror is like a Sophoclean Loony Toon. The antipathy of form and content..." Nestor forced himself to stop speculating. Whatever Mallomar Man had to say on the subject was less than irrelevant and could only lead to more trouble.

"Can't you be more specific?" Susan Acorn asked later that night, looking up from her pillow.

"Do we have to talk about *Polly* now, darling?"

"Well, yes, actually, Nestor, I'd like to hear your opinion while it's fresh in your mind. Either you liked *Polly Valentine* or you hated *Polly Valentine*. There's no in-between with that kind of cinematic statement."

"Statement?"

"He is a serious director. He did do *Cigar* and *One No Trump*. You saw those, didn't you?"

"Of course I saw those. And *Polly Valentine* shows the same kind of intensity."

"I felt it was a departure. There was depth and maturity. What was your favorite scene?"

"We're making love, Susan."

"And this is part of our love play. Remember the preliminaries? What was your favorite single scene? Mine was the symbolic decapitation."

"Decapitation? Yes, mine too!"

Susan took his face in her hands and kissed him.

"But I felt the horror was diluted by the animation and the animation was compromised by the horror."

"That's how you reacted, Nestor? To *Polly Valentine*? I don't think you saw the movie with your eyes open. Or was it your heart? I'm honestly upset by all this."

After that night, Nestor was certain that neither the film or the

theater mattered, or the time or even triangulation. Whenever, wherever he chose to see a movie, that man would arrive in time to plug the space between himself and the silver screen. He was grateful to Susan Acorn, even though they had broken up soon after their *Polly* confrontation. It was she who'd first spoken of decapitation, however symbolic.

Nestor bought a wicker basket from a wrinkled Peruvian at a Soho street fair, and an officer's sword from a Village antique shop that specialized in Teutonic souvenirs. At his local Korean vegetable market, he ordered a case of honeydews already so ripe they were marked down by fifty percent.

At home, he fashioned a makeshift mannequin from an old plaid shirt shaped around foam rubber slabs, stiff denims fortified with bubble wrap, and, for whimsy, a pair of Nikes filled out with wooden shoe trees. He rigged the body with a neck that was a gift from the city, a wide rubber tube he found on the street. The rubber was elastic enough to cup a honeydew like a clerical collar and hold it in place.

In the same whimsical spirit that made him use the shoe trees, he took a Magic Marker and drew a face on each honeydew head, then topped the fruity scalps with tufts of absorbent cotton.

Nestor positioned two kitchen chairs, one behind the other, in front of his TV set. His floppy dummy was strapped into the front seat with worn-out belts he'd marked for the Salvation Army but somehow saved. Then he slipped a video of *Lawrence Of Arabia* into his VCR and pressed Power and Play on the remote.

With his basket cleverly hidden inside a large plastic bag from Bed, Bath, and Beyond, and his truncated sword concealed in a black umbrella, he sat behind his honeydew Frankenstein and watched the movie. He even had Goobers, not the large, theatrical size, but a miniature ration from the candy store.

While *Lawrence* rode the desert sands, Nestor licked and chewed and thought about his predicament. For some reason, it didn't matter *why*, he was being movie deprived like one of those rotten little rebels forced to sit facing backwards in the Camp Barefoot recreation hall.

In most cases they deserved denial. But Nestor was certain his persecution was unfair and possibly even arbitrary. He was no major sinner, he kept the social contract, give or take. He was only doing his best,

trying to hold his own in the world and possibly reach some distant shore, swimming against a clutching undertow that sucked at him like he sucked chocolate.

Was he being paranoid? The man who blocked his vision, not unlike fat blocks an artery to the heart, was no fantasy. The fat had to be reamed away or surgically bypassed. It was a matter of personal survival. There was a whole crop of major motion pictures on the horizon.

This creature who plagued him was guilty of the worst kind of sabotage. And who would miss that bundle of pus and negativism? The man hated everything; his acid eyes peered inside armpits and between toes. Depression and cynicism could erode even the strongest and most beautiful temple.

"Wait for pay cable or the rental store?" Nestor answered the slumping dummy who hadn't asked anything. "Put my life on hold for a year? Thanks, but no thanks."

Nestor positioned his basket, slipped his sword from inside the umbrella, held his breath, and struck. The first rehearsal was a fiasco. The honeydew was slashed at midpoint, near the nose. Juice and seeds scattered in every direction. Green flesh fell into Nestor's lap, missing the basket by at least an inch.

But Nestor got up, replaced the severed head with another, and tried again. Nestor had never been overly impulsive or impatient. He believed that he who learns slowly learns best.

For three months Nestor allowed himself to endure indignity. He saw *American Rapture*, *Invaders of the Dream*, and a remake of *Romeo and Juliet* without seeing much of anything except his nemesis' rear. At night, he executed honeydews by the dozen.

Once, during *Invaders*, the man came with a companion, a boy, and Nestor verged on hysteria when he considered that the tumor might have metastasized and produced an offspring. But the boy had thin bones and wispy blond hair. The idea that he could be even a distant relation defied every law of genetics. The whole picture long, and it was a long picture, Nestor heard a pontifical Mr. Wiseass chortle and whisper his put-downs.

The film was already nominated for ten awards and had grossed two hundred million. Nestor pitied the boy and was tempted to lean forward and plug those impressionable young ears with fresh Goobers. Instead,

Nestor closed his own ears. He vowed not to repeat the error that already cost him Susan Acorn's delicious embrace and nearly his job.

Nestor wasn't much interested in those films anyhow. He was there to study, to calculate, plot and plan. He took notes in the dark, how the man shifted, how he held his head, how often he fidgeted, at what angle his head tilted forward, or to a side. Most important, Nestor tried to read the man's body language, to anticipate when the head would tilt back. Gravity was Nestor's best ally.

Finally, two months later, Nestor was ready to attack. His practice sessions at home were always successful. A quick swish of the sword and another surrogate skull would be neatly cut from its base and fall backward into the waiting basket; towels at the bottom muffled sound and drank up excess juice.

Nestor browsed listings in the newspaper and chose his killing ground. The film he picked had not only triangulated, it seemed more than perfect.

Crescendo told the story of an obscure classical composer obsessed with the creation of a symphony powerful enough and loud enough to muffle the booming voices of enemy cannon destroying his beloved hamlet. *A celebration of the human spirit, a testimony to courage and resolve...As the music rises and crashes like a wave of outrage on a violated beach of resolve, one is totally immersed in a cathedral of cacophony and yet there is harmony and the redeeming trill of the lark.* Nestor savored the reviews. "Loud is good," he thought. "The louder the better." Because even with the cleanest swipe of his blade there was a slight *woosh* from the firmest of melons, albeit hardly more than a sigh.

Nestor covered his tracks on the evening chosen for murder. Before he went out, he had Chinese food sent to his flat. He dismantled his mannequin and got rid of the final debris of bisected honeydews. He turned his TV to his favorite program with the volume high enough to be heard by his neighbors. He even phoned Susan Acorn to ask how she'd been, compare notes, and make the point of telling her how much he looked forward to spending an evening of lethargy and solitude.

Then he slid the sword into its umbrella sheath, perfectly reasonable since the evening's prediction included a *chance of showers*, lined his wicker basket with a fresh turkish towel, hid it inside the Bed, Bath, and

Beyond bag, and went quietly down the back staircase and out through the basement door.

It was both ironic and convenient that *Crescendo* was playing at the same local theater where he'd first encountered the sullen giant. When the deed was done, he could be home in a matter of minutes.

This time, the theater was practically empty. Nestor chose a seat at random and waited for the lights to dim. He played his Goobers game, priming his taste buds with two, holding back the primal urge to gobble up the rest. That proved he was in cool control.

His victim arrived on schedule and plopped into his ordained seat just after Nestor caught a glimpse of *Crescendo's* associated producers.

As it happened, the reviews proved accurate. It was a *loud* movie, filled with screams, explosions and trumpets. The music vibrated through Nestor's intestines.

He waited until the small audience was entirely hypnotized, caught in a shell of emotion. Then Nestor freed his sword and balanced the basket between his knees.

Just as he cocked his arm to strike the death blow, the man in front of him turned. Nestor was eye-to-eye with a face that belonged to an errant moon from a distant planet. It was pocked by asteroids, imprinted with a smirk, glossed by jellied perspiration. The man leaned closer.

"You have Goobers. I smell them. My doctor forbids them. They're like tiny bombs. But if you could spare a few, I'd gladly pay a dollar. This movie is such vomit, that elephant-fart score has got me so crazy, I need something tasty if you know what I mean. Mercy, then? A Goober for the old guy?"

"Now you want my Goobers?" Nestor said, and swung his sword with magnificent efficiency. The fact that its target was so cooperative, leaning toward him, miraculously tilted downward, was a gift from the gods.

The man's last expression, something between a plea and anticipation of taboo Goobers, clung to that continent of a face until the eyes rolled and faded to black.

Then the head fell neatly into Nestor's basket. The deed was done. Nobody noticed anything unusual.

Everything went so smoothly, Nestor stayed for most of *Crescendo*. He did exit quickly though, before the closing credits ended and the lights

came back on. He'd missed the opening, but from what he'd managed to see, Nestor found the movie deserving of its praise. He couldn't imagine why the man complained or criticized such an *uplifting story* and *memorable score*.

His original plan was to dispose of the head in the Union Square BMT station but instead he took it home and put it in his freezer. The man was, after all, an encyclopedia of 20th Century cinema. He had probably seen everything there was to see.

Nestor knew and respected what he'd read about cryogenics. It was entirely feasible that at some future date the head could be thawed and returned to ambience. With that possibility, what he'd done to save himself, however justified, could hardly be called murder in the first degree.

And he might actually have the opportunity to ask the head what it was about *Crescendo* that bothered it enough to risk health, well being, and more for a few Goobers. That head certainly was smart enough to know that Goobers are addictive, that within minutes it would crave its own box and urge its body to make a trip to the theater's refreshment stand. To do that might have risked missing a climactic scene, the very scene that could have completely altered opinion.

The head, turned to ice, took up important space in Nestor's small refrigerator. It changed the way he shopped for frozen vegetables. Otherwise, it gave him little trouble beyond a few disturbing dreams.

Nestor had no further problem at the movies and found himself in agreement with most of the respected critics and his peers at work and play. He was promoted to Divisional Sales Manager within a year and was welcomed into many warm beds. Despite the Goobers, even his dental check-up went well, and his cholesterol count remained within the norm.



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JONATHAN CARROLL NINE FANTASY NOVELS THAT SHOULD BE MADE INTO FILMS

Winter's Tale by Mark Helprin.

A magical realist tale about a man and woman in a fantastical Manhattan we have always wished for but never known. Apparently Scorsese was interested in this for a long time and it has gone in and out of option for years. Understandably so.

Dreams of Leaving by Rupert Thompson.

A man, a contemporary Candide, living in a small English village discovers no one from there has ever left. But he does and goes to a slightly skewed London that is vaguely familiar and thoroughly magical. But like all good Cándides, he chooses to go home again and that's where the trouble begins.

Mister Touch by Malcolm Bosse.

After the world ends (with a bang), some of the survivors walk out of a broken New York in search of whatever promised land is left, led by Mister Touch himself. Reminiscent of *The Stand* but different enough to be intriguing and very satisfying.

The Watcher by Charles Maclean.

One of the few books I've ever read that genuinely scared me. The first fifty pages alone are enough to make it worthy of being turned into a film.

The Easter House by David Rhodes.

Combine *Psycho* with *In Cold Blood* and the Addams Family and you have this story. Rhodes wrote three wonderful books and then disappeared. Both his work and the work of Edward Whittemore should immediately be reissued. Whittemore died a few years ago, forgotten, and I'm just hoping Rhodes is still around, even if his pen is silent.

Sinai Tapestry by Edward Whittemore.

Everything Tom Robbins is not. Funny, profound, visionary, learned. This is the story of who really wrote the Bible and everything you ever heard about god but were too afraid to ask.

Von Bek by Michael Moorcock.

A man who willingly makes a deal with the devil and, amidst swords and sorcery and the Holy Grail (to mention a few), shows us how the grand scale should really be done. Why hasn't Hollywood tuned into Moorcock's channel yet?

Let's Put the Future Behind Us by Jack Womack.

No one knows what's going on in Russia these days except Womack, clearly. This book in the right hands could be turned into *A Clockwork Orange*.

The Child Garden by Geoff Ryman.

Because everything is there for a great fantasy film. Don't change a letter. ☞



KATHI MAIO

EIGHT SF/FANTASY FILMS THAT HAVE REALLY STAYED WITH ME

NOTE THAT THE TITLE doesn't indicate that these are the best sf/fantasy films. Rather, these are the movies that I remember most vividly, because I saw them at a certain age, during a particular political era, or at a precise moment of my life when they were most likely to have a maximum impact. They resonate still.

The Day the Earth Stood Still (1951) When I saw this film in the mid-sixties, I was ready for its pro-Peace message. Big time. Another appeal was Michael Rennie as the messianic visitor. While most aliens were (and are) strange or scary looking, Michael Rennie was a suave dreamboat. "Klaatu barada nikto," baby!

Invasion of the Body Snatchers (1956) Another movie I saw as a child on television. I knew nothing about the political symbolism of the plot. I only knew that the pods, and the placid replicants they produced, scared the bejesus out of me.

A Clockwork Orange (1971) I can't say that I *liked* this movie. In fact, the way Kubrick tried to manipulate me into identifying with Macolm McDowell's thug, instead of his victims, really pissed me off. Still, I was shaken to the core (and oddly exhilarated) after watching this film. And it tormented my dreams for weeks.

Close Encounters of the Third Kind (1977) Little E.T., in 1982, left me totally cold. But this Spielberg actually got to me. Marvelous special effects actually serve the story and its complex characters. You don't see *that* very often, boys and girls.

Alien (1979) A creature feature, powerfully realized, with maximum atmospheric dread, and a minimum of graphic violence. (Unlike its many unfortunate sequels.) And then there's Sigourney Weaver's Ripley, one of the most original (and utterly believable) sf women ever brought to the screen.

Adventures of Buckaroo Banzai (Across the Eighth Dimension) (1984) Yes, this is a self-conscious attempt to make a cult film....But, hey, it works for me. Forget about John Lithgow on *Third Rock*. His Dr. Lizardo, here, really showcases his talent.

Edward Scissorhands (1990) Tim Burton's greatest film, to date, is pure screen magic. Romantic, tragic, and totally bizarre, this fable speaks to the outcast in all of us.

Truly Madly Deeply (1991) Not just my favorite ghost story, this is one of my all-time favorite movies. It's about grief and dying, sure. But it is even more about human goodness and our resilient capacity to love. ♡



PLUMAGE FROM PEGASUS

PAUL DI FILIPPO

Escapist Velocity

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**ESCAPIST
ENTERTAINMENTS:
THE WHORES OF
FANTASY VERSUS THE
VIRGIN OF REALISM**

by
Didier Bonlatté

Never in the glorious history of narratological mankind has the art of storytelling through moving pictures and sound — 2D or 3D pictures, simple external stereo or full cerebro-stim sound, these combinations captured on any substrate from optical-weaves to quantum-freckles — exhibited a more dire and parlous disease! I am referring,

of course, to the unavoidable clichéd fantasy content of nearly ninety percent of the professionally released entertainments loosed on the tasteless, gawping public in recent months.

In these objectionable, pandering extravaganzas, all sensation and no thought, directors turn their backs on the admittedly grim and unexciting realities of today, instead substituting meretricious and gaudy fantasies dredged from the warped imaginations of money-hungry scriptwriters mining outdated works from the scrapheap of history. (Never have pointless remarks been so prevalent!) AI-generated special effects become the new gods, replacing human finesse with the old-fashioned digital paintbox. Desperate for work, fine actors and actresses — some of them non-virtual! — debase themselves by portraying freakish, outré costumed characters adrift in various exotic Nevernever-lands, the relevance of which to mankind's cur-

rent concerns is absolutely zero. Critics cry out stridently to no avail! Profit is the only voice the studios listen to, and as long as the public continues to vote with their chip-purses in favor of these lurid abominations, the current sad state of affairs will never change.

And yet, one has a moral obligation to speak out, to argue unceasingly for a return to realistic chronicles of everyday galactic life. Perhaps this very essay will be the hagthistle that breaks the swampwolf's jaw!

The birth of this vile trend toward unreality is easy enough to date: in the year 2148 appeared *Mr. Sammler's Planet*, directed by Giorgio Scula, of California VII. Despite its modern-sounding and realistic title, the work proved to be the most arrant fantasy! Set on a barely technological world ignorant of space-travel, a milieu still subscribing to numerous discarded paradigms, this film featured absurdly dressed characters in ridiculous situations no sane contemporary person could imagine! Millions were spent on makeup and sets (a fairytale environment called "New York"), as well as on props and the recreation of extinct animals such as cockroaches and Republicans.

Although this foolish entertain-

ment should have failed miserably, by some caprice it did not! Apparently, the viewing public had been sated with too many by-the-numbers realistic works. Like suicidal cliff-leaping yellowrats, across a thousand thousand worlds they swarmed to every public venue showing Scula's debased yet—even I reluctantly concur—hypnotically weird entertainment.

To the eternal despair of realists everywhere, the floodgates of fantasy were opened wide. Tentatively at first, then with accelerated speed, every studio and director jumped into this polluted river, each vying to outdo the other in the bizarreness of their productions. And even now, eleven years later, the highwater mark of this fetid inundation has not yet been reached.

Quickly following *Mr. Sammler's Planet* came *Dos Passos' USA* (2150), directed by Paul Evenhooover; *The Executioner's Song* (2151), by Steffen Talkcity; *Midnight Cowboy* (2151), by Stanley Ickbru; *Easy Rider* (2152), by Clive Rekarb; and *The Ginger Man* (2153), by Robert Kismetkiss. By virtue of their infrequency, these early works of fantasy possessed some small vapid allure. But any storytelling or audiovisual virtues were over-

whelmed by nonsensical and counterfactual touches.

The isolated worlds depicted were all ones where humans were the only intelligent species (an arrogancy which by itself has spawned a number of penetrating analyses; see Gabrielle Sansculotte's *Speciesism in the Oeuvre of Terry Lillygam*, *op. cit.*). With their unaugmented and irreplaceable bodies cloaked in the crudest synthetic fibers or — horrors! — dead and dumb organics, the travesties of humanity in these films offered eager viewers an outlet from the dullness of the present. Flaunting their unrectified emotions and laughable goals, wasting their time in pointless "work" and "play" and "love" situations, the characters in the typical fantasy film inspired the same kind of empathy to be found in a virtuality icon.

Now came the second wave of even less talented directors playing their willfully unreal games: *The Kindness of Women*, *Turtle Moon*, *The Deep End of the Ocean*, *Libra*, (all 2154), *The Horse Whisperer* and *M.A.S.H.* (both 2156), *Casino* (2157), *Leaving Las Vegas* (2158) — the tiresome list of wild and pointless dreams could be extended for pages. And in each of these fantasies, new attempts were made to impose on

the audience's credulity. Could any balanced sapient today actually believe the interpersonal or political relations depicted in, say, Ray Hairyhouse's *Primary Colors* (2155)?

Meanwhile, what of the poor realists? Either their projects were denied funding upfront by short-sighted and trendy executives, or, if made, their meticulously realistic entertainments were dumped into a few minor sensoriums without publicity. And what is the result of this ignorant policy? Only that the most significant events of the current era — sometimes boring, sometimes trivial, perhaps, yet still near and dear to our modern hearts — are left unchronicled, deprived of art's transmuting and enlightening touch. We are now a culture that refuses to deal artistically with its own present, for fear of being seen as tedious and "unimaginative."

The wealth of unused contemporary material is astonishing. The interstellar battle between the Aldebaran and Ophiuchian polities, in which ten thousand Limbaugh Class war vessels were annihilated, has found no historical director willing to stage even a small-budget re-enactment. The invasion of Webb IX by the Gaseous Horde has no interpreters. The burgeoning

symbiosis between humans and the Earwig culture of Edelman V goes begging for a journalistically minded artist who could capture its complexities. The settlement of Shepard's Dyson Sphere finds no one to give it voice. And the simple yet affecting tale of the supernova that wiped out the Hundred Habittats of the Laidlaw Nebula seems not to merit even the assignment of a lesser director such as Ron Wardhow.

If there is any comfort to be

taken, it is in the fact that no trend, however brainless and mercenary, lasts forever. Soon, if there is any justice in the world, the public will tire of the colorful exotica summarized by one critic as "the extramarital affairs of dentists," and reawaken to the simple, homey, mundane attractions of death-rays and bug-eyed monsters, rogue planets and unstoppable hiveminds, imperial princesses and jaunty starship captains. ¶

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JAMES MORROW

EIGHT GREAT ANIMATED FANTASY FILMS

"A Warm Reception in L.A." Vincent Cafarelli and Candy Kugel's wonderfully sardonic music video is required viewing for anyone who has ever considered writing a screenplay on spec.

"Bad Luck Blackie." No filmmaker has ever blended the quotidian and the quixotic, the mundane and the insane, as powerfully as Tex Avery. This masterful cartoon, like much of Avery's output, is an auteur-de-force.

"Minnie the Moocher." I would love to know what, exactly, audiences made of Max and Dave Fleischer's disturbing little films in their day. Like so many of the Betty Boops, this is simultaneously a celebration of the ineffable and an homage to the id.

"Bolero." The highlight of Bruno Bozzetto's *Allegro Non Troppo* turns the pageant of evolution into a surrealist sideshow, the whole bizarre extravaganza unfolding to Maurice Ravel's sensual, sinuous melody.

"Before the Law." For the prologue of Orson Welles's brilliant adaptation of *The Trial*, Alexander Alexeieff and Clair Parker illustrated Kafka's parable using the "pin-screen" process, which employs a grid comprising thousands of pins that can be manipulated to create shadows and highlights. Technically it's not animation, but you should track it down anyway, though decent home video editions are rare.

My Neighbor Totoro. Hayao Miyazaki's gentle fantasy tells of two young children and their encounters with Totoro, a kind of benign indigenous bigfoot. The director has been called "the Walt Disney of Japan," but the film's odd rhythms make you wonder whether he's ever seen an American cartoon. The scene of the children waiting for a bus in the rain is as haunting as anything in a Kurosawa feature.

The Fabulous World of Jules Verne. Czech director Karel Zeman keys the imagery to nineteenth-century engravings, a medium upon which the passage of time has bestowed peculiarly science-fictional resonances. The result is both an adaptation and an evocation.

Pinocchio. Directed by Ben Sharpsteen and Hamilton Luske, the greatest of the Disney features is an epic in a near-Homeric sense, ranging across an astonishing number of locations, adventures, emotions, and modalities in only eighty-eight minutes. The innovative multi-plane camera effects are best appreciated on the big screen. There is a rumor that this movie was made for children. ☞



FILMS

ESTHER M. FRIESNER

BUT WHAT I *REALLY* WANT TO DO IS DIRECT (MY IDEAL ROLE ASSIGNMENTS FOR SF CLASSICS)

1. *Dune* by Frank Herbert
(Hey, second time's the charm!)

Paul Atreides	Jerry Seinfeld
Lady Jessica	Julia ("Elaine") Louis-Dreyfus
Baron Harkonnen	Wayne ("Newman") Knight
Feyd-Rautha	Michael ("Kramer") Richards
Duncan Idaho	Jason ("George") Alexander

("Ever notice how when you're out on the sand, you're waiting for the Worm, you've got all the Fremmen watching you, maybe taking a few side bets about whether you're gonna fall off or not, you're so tense and all of a sudden you realize... I've got a wedgie in my stillsuit? And *that's* when the Worm decides to show up! It never fails. Doesn't that just drive you *crazy*?")

2. *She* by H. Rider Haggard

Ayesha	RuPaul
Bileli	Bobcat Goldthwait

(No comment. None. And you can't make me.)

3. *The Silver Metal Lover* by Tanith Lee

Julia Roberts and R2D2
(Award for Best Make-up. Twice.)

4. *A Boy and His Dog* by Harlan Ellison

Vic	Leonardo DiCaprio
Blood	Grommit

("Cracking dead rat, Grommit! I mean Blood.")

5. *Dragon Singer* by Anne McCaffrey

Menolly Judy Tenuta
 (See #2, above. I insist.)

6. *Wyrd Sisters* by Terry Pratchett

Magrat Winona Ryder
 Nanny Ogg Bette Midler
 Granny Weatherwax Glenn Close

("Cookie, baby, sweetie, I'm telling you, Bette was born to sing 'The Hedgehog Can Never Be Buggered At All!'")

7. *A Canticle for Leibowitz* by Walter M. Miller, Jr.

Brother Francis Gerald of Utah Kermit the Frog

(By special arrangement with Jim Henson Productions and Disney, this all-Muppet extravaganza will be a musical, featuring that feel-good show-stopper, "It's Not Easy Being Green...and Celibate.")

8. *The Caves of Steel* by Isaac Asimov

Lije Bailey Peter Falk
 R. Daneel Olivaw Peter Weller
 (Once a Robocop....)

9. *Flowers for Algernon* by Daniel Keyes

Pinky and the Brain
 (See #2 and 5. Now.)

10. And last but not least, featuring the dramatic talents of Brad Pitt, Harrison Ford, Mel Gibson, Will Smith, Sean Connery, Antonio Banderas, and Tom Cruise, it's...

Foundation?
Time Enough for Love?
 one of the *Callahan's* books?

Look, tootsie, honey, bubbie, they take off their shirts for half the picture. You mean you still care what the story is?

Hey, just because it's sf doesn't mean it can't be fantasy too! ☞

As Hollywood budgets multiply past NASA's, the notion Terry Bisson posited in Voyage to the Red Planet—that the first people to make the journey from Earth to Mars will be Hollywood actors—seems more plausible all the time. But this new story doesn't actually concern itself with thespians, except in the sense that all the world's a stage. The players in this story certainly have their exits and entrances, and as Shakespeare said, one man in his time plays many parts. But what of two men out of their time? What parts do they play in the past...or in the future?

Incident at Oak Ridge

By Terry Bisson

PART ONE

EXT — A MOUNTAIN TRAIL IN AN APPALACHIAN HOLLOW.
EVENING.

TWO YOUNG MEN ARE HIKING.
FRED is dark, tall, about thirty. KIM is Asian, stockier, same age. Both have short hair. They are junior college pros — Fred in

physics, Kim in English.

It is fall, and still warm. They carry light day packs. Both wear Polartec sweats, light Gore-tex jackets, Nike boots — modern gear.

It is getting dark. They are in a hurry. Kim is peeling off his jacket. Fred is punching numbers into a cellular phone.

FRED

Ann's gonna kill me. I promised her we would be back in Knoxville by five. Wish I could get this phone to work!

KIM

How did it get so warm? Wish I had a cigarette.

FRED

I know we're not out of range. I checked my messages right after we had lunch. (looks up) A cigarette? *Kim!!!*

KIM

What would you say if I told you there was a pack of Marlboros in the glove compartment of my Cherokee?

FRED

What would you say if I told you I found them this morning while you were paying for the gas and threw them out?

EXT. THE MOUNTAINS. A LOW TANGLE OF GORGES, A FEATURE-LESS MAZE.

Voices continue as before.

KIM (o.s.)

I would say you were a cold-hearted bastard.

FRED (o.s.)

And I would say friends don't let friends smoke. You quit, remember?

KIM (o.s.)

Yeah, yeah. Damn! Every one of these hollows looks exactly the same. Are we still on the right trail?

FRED (o.s.)

Got me. What happened to the blazes?

EXT. ON THE TRAIL, AS BEFORE.

Kim is studying his Casio wristwatch; Fred, his cellular phone.

KIM

Maybe the storm washed them away. Like the display on my watch. I'm getting a blank!

FRED

Maybe that lightning zapped our eproms. I'm not even getting a dial tone.

The SOUND of an ENGINE, more like a truck in low gear than a car.

A FLASH of headlights up the hillside, through the trees.

KIM

Fred, look! A car!

CUT TO:

EXT. A STEEP DIRT ROAD.

Two soldiers in World War II uniforms, in an open Jeep. The SERGEANT holds an M-1 carbine between his knees; he has a Southern hillbilly accent. The CORPORAL (from Brooklyn) is driving.

SERGEANT

I thought you said you knew this road, Corporal.

CORPORAL

I do, Sarge. We're still inside Perimeter Two. I must have missed the first turn in that storm.

SERGEANT

That was the most hellacious lightning I've ever saw. Hey! Stop.

The sergeant stands up in the front seat of the Jeep, M-1 carbine at the ready.

WIDER VIEW:

Kim and Fred run out of the woods onto the road, waving.

SERGEANT

Halt or I'll shoot!

KIM

Relax, man. Are you guys — ?

SERGEANT

Halt! You are in a restricted area. Turn around and put your hands on the back of your head.

FRED

(offended)

You fellows are way out of line here! This is a public recreational —

The sergeant FIRES the carbine over their heads.

Everybody and everything stops. All that can be heard is the idling of the Jeep.

SERGEANT

Shut up! Turn around. NOW! Down on your knees!

Fred and Kim get down on their knees.

SERGEANT

Hands on the back of your head!

Fred and Kim put their hands on the backs of their heads.

KIM

(whisper)

What is this, fucking *Deliverance*?

FRED

This is no joke. These guys are nuts. Some kind of militia creeps.

SERGEANT

Shut up! Corporal, get their weapons. The Jap first.

The corporal pulls on the emergency brake with a LOUD RATCHETING SOUND. Gets out of the Jeep.

KIM

Jap? I'm not Japanese.

FRED

And we're not hunters, we're hikers. We're not carrying any weapons! We're from Knoxville. We both teach at Cumberland Community College.

SERGEANT

Shut up, both of you!

The corporal frisks them both. Finds Fred's cell phone.

CORPORAL

Sarge, look at this! Some kind of radio.

FRED

It's a cellular phone.

SERGEANT

You ain't selling me nothing. Now shut up!

KIM

(under his breath)

You ignorant fucking hillbilly!

The corporal drags the two packs over and puts them in the Jeep. Hands the phone to the sergeant.

CORPORAL

Lots of nylon and plastic stuff. The shoes look sorta German.

KIM

German? Are you guys playing Army or something?!

FRED

Our billfolds are in the car. We're hikers with a perfect right to...

SERGEANT

Shut up! Put them in the Jeep.

CUT TO:

EXT. GUARDPOST. ENTRANCE TO MILITARY COMPOUND.

The Jeep pulls up. Fred and Kim are sitting in the back with their hands on their heads. The sergeant holds the M-1 on them. An MP looks at the two captives admiringly.

MP

Wow. Where'd you find these two?

SERGEANT

Inside P Two, outside P One. Careful, they speak English. The Jap too.

FRED

Of course we speak English!

KIM

What's this Jap shit? I'm Korean, and I'm as fucking American as —

SERGEANT

(jostles him roughly)

Shut up! Where should I take them?

GUARD

That new schoolhouse in D is empty. I'll call security. Or should I call intelligence?

SERGEANT

Better call both. Do you have any handcuffs?

GUARD

Just one pair.

CUT TO:

EXT. JEEP ON A MUDDY STREET.

Lights of a suburb under construction. Lumber, equipment all around, a few military guards.

Fred and Kim in the back of the Jeep are now handcuffed together, Fred's right hand to Kim's left.

KIM

This is crazy. Do you have any idea where we are?

FRED

Afraid so. Look around.

KIM

Oak Ridge? But Oak Ridge was shut down, wasn't it?

FRED

So they tell us.

KIM

What do you mean?

FRED

I don't know what I mean, Kim. But I do know this is no backwoods redneck militia.

SERGEANT

Shut up!

CUT TO:

INT. SCHOOLROOM.

Desks for little kids, big oak teacher's desk, blackboard. A globe. Calendar on wall says OCTOBER 1944.

Fred and Kim, handcuffed together, are hustled in the door by the sergeant.

FRED

This is outrageous. I demand to speak with your commanding officer.

SERGEANT

Shut up!

The door is SLAMMED. Kim starts pacing. Fred has no choice but to follow awkwardly. Neither notices the calendar.

KIM

Commanding officer? You believe these guys are really the Army? They're play-acting. They don't even look right.

FRED

I don't know what to believe. Maybe it's some kind of maneuvers.

Kim idly spins globe as he passes. Stops, jerking Fred to a sudden halt.

KIM

Hey! There's only one Korea! And look at Russia. Weird.

FRED

What's so weird about an out-of-date globe in a Tennessee schoolroom?

KIM

Except this globe is new. (Looks around) So are these old-fashioned chairs, this black blackboard —

FRED

Oh shit. Kim. (Points to calendar) Look.

They walk together, in step at last, to the front of the room and look at the calendar. Fred flips through it.

FRED

(shaking head)

This is not possible.

KIM

Neither is Oak Ridge. But you saw it and so did I.

Dragging Fred, Kim crosses to door and knocks on it.

KIM

Hey! Sergeant!

SERGEANT

Shut up!

KIM

Just tell me the date.

SERGEANT

Wednesday. October 11.

FRED

He means — the year.

SERGEANT

1944. I don't know what you call it in Germany.

Fred and Kim stare at each other. There is a long silence as they sit down, side by side, in the little desks.

KIM

It's not fucking possible.

FRED

You're right. Except that it's happening. It's like quantum physics.

KIM

What do you mean?

FRED

It doesn't make any sense but it explains everything else. The GIs, the MIs ...

KIM

The Jeep. My God...The Jap!

FRED

(nodding)

Oak Ridge. The hiking trails run through the old perimeter of the plant, when it was top secret.

KIM

The Manhattan Project. Jesus! They're making the atomic bomb, and they think we're spies! They think I'm Japanese!

Fred and Kim look at one another in silent terror. Then Kim gets up and knocks on the door again.

KIM

Hey! Sergeant!

SERGEANT

I told you, shut up!

KIM

All I want is a cigarette.

FRED

What are you doing? You quit, remember?

KIM

If I'm going to be shot as a spy, I'm going to have a last cigarette.
(To door) Come on, Sarge, have a heart. If it's 1944, I'll tell you who wins the World Series.

A cigarette slides under the door, followed by a book of matches.

KIM

Thanks! The Cardinals.

SOLDIER

Big deal. Everybody knows the Cards are going to win. Even a damn Jap. Now shut up!

Kim LIGHTS UP while Fred glares at him; since they are handcuffed together it looks almost like Fred is helping.

FADE

PART TWO

INT. THE SCHOOL ROOM, TWENTY MINUTES LATER.

Fred and Kim are sitting at two tiny desks, side by side. The DOOR OPENS and the sergeant comes in, followed by the CAPTAIN, who wears a Colt .45.

CAPTAIN

Sprachen zie deutsch?

FRED

We don't speak German. We're from Knoxville.

CAPTAIN

Kitano ay tora boru.

KIM

Auf Weiderzein, you fucking hillbilly idiots.

The captain SMACKS Kim across the face. In a SUDDEN EXPLOSION OF VIOLENCE, Fred stands up to defend Kim and the sergeant pushes him back down in his seat. It's over almost as soon as it begins.

SERGEANT

Sit down and shut up!

FRED

Colonel, this is all a mistake.

CAPTAIN

It's Captain, and there's no mistake. You were caught redhanded in a class one restricted area. You could be shot for looking at that perimeter, much less crossing it.

KIM

We didn't cross any fucking perimeter! And I'm not —

The sergeant smacks him in the back of the head.

SERGEANT

Shut up, you murdering yellow bastard.

CAPTAIN

I have your radio.

FRED

(nervously, has a plan)

I understand what you're thinking, Captain. But you're wrong.
We know what's going on here. We're — part of the project.

CAPTAIN

You're what?

The captain looks sideways at the sergeant, who remains silent.

KIM

We didn't cross any fucking perimeter. I know it's hard to believe,
but we're from your future. We were just —

Fred stops Kim with a kick.

FRED

We're physicists, Captain. *From Manhattan*, if you know what I mean. We need to speak with Dr. Richard Feynman as soon as possible. It's a security matter.

CAPTAIN

Dr. who?

Kim looks at Fred, puzzled. Fred plunges on.

FRED

Dr. Richard Feynman, Los Alamos.

The captain is getting agitated. The sergeant, like Kim, is looking very confused.

CAPTAIN

Sergeant, wait outside the door.

The sergeant EXITS and closes the door behind him. The captain draws his .45 and cocks it menacingly.

CAPTAIN

Now say that again.

FRED

(gaining confidence)

We are physicists, on a special assignment with the Manhattan Project. Classified. You are to contact Dr. Richard Feynman at Los Alamos. Theoretical Computation Group.

CAPTAIN

(thinking it over)

Physicists. And him?

FRED

Him too. He's Korean, not Japanese.

KIM

(confused but eager to help)

An enemy of the Japanese. Besides, you had Japanese in your own Army. Not all —

Fred kicks him again. Kim shuts up. The captain looks from one to the other, suspicious.

CAPTAIN

So what were you doing in the woods?

FRED

(cool, haughty, getting into it)

Sorry, Captain. That's all I can say until we report to Dr. Feynman personally. I'm sure you can appreciate the importance of secrecy.

Kim is silent, watching all this in amazement.

CAPTAIN

(skeptical)

I'll make a call.

FRED

Please. (Holds up cuffed right hand) And unlock these.

CAPTAIN

(as he exits)

Not a chance. Sergeant, hold your position until you receive further orders from me personally.

KIM

Captain? One other thing.

CAPTAIN

Yes?

KIM

How about some cigarettes. While we're waiting for Dick.

The captain tosses Kim his half empty pack of Luckies, then slams the door emphatically.

KIM

(lighting up)

Feynman!?

FRED

The physicist. Nobel Prize, 1966. Quantum thermodynamics. He worked on the Manhattan Project as a young man. He and Oppenheimer...

KIM

I know who Richard Feynman is, Fred! You're the one who sent me that book, *Surely You're Joking, Mr. Feynman*, a couple of years ago. All I remember is he was from Brooklyn and he played the bongo drums. And was a smartass. But what does he have to do with us?

FRED

He was from Queens, actually. And what he has to do with us, is that he's going to save our lives. Maybe.

Kim is listening. Fred is so caught up in his own plan that he doesn't notice Kim is smoking.

FRED

(continues)

Richard Feynman is the one man alive in 1944 who might actually *believe* our story and be able to help us. He was an original thinker, with an open mind. A true genius. Luckily I have been reading his biography.

KIM

The captain sure as hell sat up for that "theoretical computational" stuff!

FRED

He was reacting to Los Alamos. Most of the soldiers here don't even know Los Alamos exists. Any more than they know what Oak Ridge is for.

Fred notices Kim's cigarette for the first time. Reaches for it.

FRED

(continues)

I can't believe you are smoking! You can't smoke in here! It's a classroom.

KIM

(snatching it back)

Quit being such a stick, Fred! We're stuck in the past before we were even born and you're worried about a cigarette. Besides, what good's Feynman going to do us if he's in New Mexico?

FRED

He was at Oak Ridge a lot. Maybe we'll get lucky. Or maybe they'll fly him here in a DC3. That is, if they believe me enough to call him. And if he's curious enough to want to find out what's going on.

KIM

And if he isn't curious? Or they don't bother to call him? Or we don't get lucky?

Fred solemnly puts his finger to the side of his head.

FRED

This is Oak Ridge, World War II. It doesn't even officially *exist*. There wouldn't be a trial or anything.

Kim winces. He checks his watch on his right (uncuffed) wrist.

KIM

I wonder if we get a last supper — Hey, my watch is working! I got the display back.

FRED

What time is it?

KIM

7:22. I wonder if that's our time. The date thing says November 17, 1998.

FRED

That's it! The watch! It proves we're from the future!

Fred reaches for the watch. Kim pulls it away.

KIM

It doesn't prove anything. You can program a watch to say any date.

FRED

Not in 1944 you can't! Not with an LCD display. Don't you get it? The watch is proof we're from the future, if we can get Feynman, or any scientist, or anybody with normal intelligence to look at it.

KIM

You don't think much of these Army guys, do you?

FRED

Hell no. They're itching to shoot us.

The DOOR OPENS. Kim and Fred look up and fall silent, frightened.

The captain enters with RICHARD FEYNMAN, a 30-something young man in 1940s slacks and sport shirt, wearing a windbreaker with an ID tag. He is the same age as Fred and Kim — a hip contrast to the captain.

Fred stands, pulling Kim awkwardly to his feet.

FRED

Dr. Feynman!

CAPTAIN

You know these men?

FEYNMAN

(with a mischievous grin)

Could be, Captain. Let's hear what they've got to say.

Impulsively, Kim hands his watch to Feynman.

FEYNMAN

(joking; a comic Yiddish accent)

They're salesmen? How much you want for this?

KIM

Push the little button on the side.

Alarmed, the captain grabs for the watch. Feynman pulls it away and checks the display, intrigued.

CAPTAIN

It could be a weapon!

FRED

It's a quartz digital watch. LCD display.

KIM

It's from the future!

FEYNMAN

(amused; holds watch to his ear)

Time Travelers from the future! So I guess you can tell me who wins the world series.

KIM

(points to calendar)

1944? The Cardinals.

FEYNMAN

(slips the watch into his pocket)

A safe guess, right, Captain?

The captain is not amused.

FRED

We can also tell you who wins the war. And about Bethe, and Oppenheimer — and Arline.

FEYNMAN

(suddenly serious)

Captain, perhaps I should have a word or two with these gentlemen.

The captain takes his .45 out of his holster and hands it to Feynman.

CAPTAIN

I'll be right outside the door.

He leaves, shutting the door behind him. Feynman sits on the teacher's desk facing Fred and Kim. He holds the big .45 carelessly on his lap. He is relaxed.

FEYNMAN

Time travelers, huh? Does that make me a ghost from the past? Or you, ghosts from the future?

FRED

It's no joke. I know it's hard to believe.

FEYNMAN

Try me.

KIM

In the first place, I'm Korean, not Japanese. Not that it ...

FRED

(interrupting Kim)

We are from the future, Dr. Feynman. Your future, that is. From 1998, to be exact. November 17, 1998.

Fred and Kim both look at Feynman, waiting for a response. Feynman only looks politely interested.

FRED

(continuing)

We were hiking. In 1998 this whole area is hiking trails, a wilderness preserve.

FEYNMAN

I love it — the world is going backwards!

KIM

There was some kind of electrical storm. It never did rain but there was this weird lightning —

FEYNMAN

(leans forward, curious at last)

Lightning.

FRED

Very close. Sounded like the world was being ripped apart. As soon as it stopped we started looking for Kim's car.

KIM

Jeep Cherokee. Direct descendant of the WWII military Jeep.

Fred shoots Kim a look that says, "stick to the point."

FRED

And that's when we got picked up by Oak Ridge security. We are at Oak Ridge, right?

After a slight hesitation, Feynman nods. He takes Kim's watch out of his pocket.

FRED

(continuing)

We had somehow been shifted back fifty years, to 1944.

FEYNMAN

(studying the watch)

Fifty-three years, eleven months and six days, exactly. Plus an hour and a half.

KIM

They think we are spies.

FEYNMAN

You have to admit you look suspicious. A Jap and a Jew.

KIM

I told you, I'm Korean.

FEYNMAN

(shrugs)

This is the Army. They don't know from Korean.

FRED

How'd you know I was Jewish?

FEYNMAN

(Catskill *shtik*)

Ya know, ya know? Ya look Jewish.

Fred is puzzled. He can't tell if Feynman believes their story or not. The funnyman/scientist hears it all with an ironic smile. Fred decides to push on.

FRED

We figured you were our only chance. We had to find someone who would believe us.

FEYNMAN

But why me?

FRED

You are famous. That is, you will be. You win a Nobel Prize for your work in quantum thermodynamics in 1966.

FEYNMAN

So I'm the ghost. I'm dead, I suppose.

FRED

Well, of course. Sort of. In our time. But ...

FEYNMAN

The Nobel Prize! I have to wait twenty years — but that's not so bad. And when do I die?

FRED

I — I don't think I'm supposed to tell you that.

FEYNMAN

(Catskill *shtik* again)

So, now we have rules for Time Travel?

FRED

You don't believe me, do you? (angrily) Then how do I know your wife's name, Arline? Or that you call her Putsy? Or she dies next year from TB —

A sudden silence. Kim winces. Feynman looks serious but unperturbed.

FRED

I'm sorry. I didn't...

FEYNMAN

It's okay. We're prepared for Arline's death. (Changing the mood)
Tell me, do the Dodgers ever win the Series?

KIM

Hell, yes. 1956. With a black player, too. Jackie Robinson.

FRED

And the Allies win the war.

FEYNMAN

What do we win it with — that's the question.

KIM

The atomic bomb. Hiroshima.

FEYNMAN

(surprised)

They drop it on Japan? (winces) On a *city*?

FRED

Two cities. Nagasaki and Hiroshima. You *do* believe us, then!

FEYNMAN

Why not? It's like quantum physics. It doesn't make any sense but it explains a lot. It explains you guys, for one thing. Your artifacts. (Holds up the watch) The funny shoes.

FRED

(checks his Gore-Tex boots)

Funny shoes?

KIM

Hooray! So we're not going to get shot!

FEYNMAN

Shhhh! Not by the Army anyway. Not if I can help it.

CAPTAIN

(Knocking on door) What's going on in there?

FEYNMAN

It's all right, Captain. (To Fred and Kim) You guys must be starving. Let's order out ...

FADE OUT

PART THREE

INT. SCHOOLROOM. HALF HOUR LATER.

They are finishing their dinners, GI rations. Fred and Kim are still handcuffed together.

FEYNMAN

They call it NASA, huh? But I must be pretty old. Do I get to go into space?

FRED

I probably shouldn't get specific.

FEYNMAN

I understand. This is like talking to God. (Bangs on his catsup) Tell me, God, do they ever solve this problem?

KIM

Surely you are joking, Mr. Feynman.

FEYNMAN

Huh? Oh, I get it, that's the book you were telling me about. Is that how you knew I was at Oak Ridge? It's supposed to be a secret, you know.

FRED

I got that from another book, your biography. *Genius*, by James Gleick.

FEYNMAN

Great title! It so happens that I arrived here yesterday to investigate what Oak Ridge calls a thermodynamic incident, and Oppy and I call a loop-singularity.

KIM

Oppenheimer? A meltdown?

FEYNMAN

(shaking his head)

Potentially far more serious than that. It appears the forces that bind the nucleus of the atom, also bind the past and future.

FRED

You mean — ?

FENYMAN

(nods)

You might say I've been expecting you. Or something like you. The "lightning" you saw was the opening of the loop-singularity, which your presence here in the present, or if you insist, the past, serves to stabilize. Temporarily.

KIM

Conservation of energy?

FEYNMAN

More or less. But you're the English professor, right? Let's just call it a dependent parenthetical clause.

Feynman pulls a pack of Luckies from his jacket and lights two cigarettes. Hands one to Kim.

FRED

Those things will kill you.

FEYNMAN

(with a devil-may-care grin)

Yeah, but according to you guys I'm already dead.

KIM

And I'm not even born! So lighten up, Fred!

FRED

(not amused)

So what now? How do we get back to our own time? Or — do we?

KIM

(taking a long drag)

I like it here. Can you smoke in the movies? Can I bring my girlfriend? Better not, though. She actually is Japanese —

FEYNMAN

Oppy and I have a plan to close the loop. Can't leave it open, you know.

KIM

Another lightning flash?

FEYNMAN

Exactly. (Looks at Kim's watch) I was going to order us coffee, but it's getting late.

Feynman knocks on the door. The captain opens it.

FEYNMAN

Bring the Jeep around, Captain, if you will. I'm taking these two with me, through the range.

FRED

(holds up cuffs)

What about these?

FEYNMAN

(conspiratorially)

Leave them on or people will talk. You are still prisoners, remember.

Feynman follows them out of the classroom. Before leaving he pauses and expertly removes the clip from the .45. Puts the clip in his pocket and jams the pistol into his belt.

CUT TO:

EXT. THE JEEP. NIGHT.

The captain is driving under streetlights. Feynman in the front seat. Fred and Kim handcuffed together in the back.

The Jeep pulls up at the guardpost and the captain hands the MP a folded paper. The MP unfolds it and reads it, refolds it and hands it back. Salutes.

The captain salutes him back, then looks at Feynman. Gets a nod and steps out of the Jeep. Fred watches all this intently.

Feynman slides into the driver's seat. Grinds the gears. Starts off, killing the Jeep. Restarts it. They buck off into the darkness, leaving the guardpost and the lights behind.

FRED

What was that all about?

FEYNMAN

The Privilege of Science — Mystery. (Grinding gears) 'Scuse my driving. Kid from Queens, you know.

KIM

Wish you could see my Jeep. It's a direct descendant of this one but it has AC, automatic, CD player.

FEYNMAN

What's a CD player? Is that like the LCD display?

FRED

You're going to kill us, aren't you?

Kim is startled by this. Feynman is not; he is concentrating on driving as they lurch into the darkness.

FRED

You're going to shoot us. That's your so-called plan, isn't it?

KIM

(angrily, to Fred)

What the hell are you talking about, Fred? He's saving our lives!

FRED

(bitterly)

Oh yeah? Tell him, *Doctor Feynman*. Tell him your plan.

The Jeep bounces on a dirt road, into the trees. Darker and darker.

FEYNMAN

(noisily grinding gears)

There's nothing to tell. I'm sending you back to your own time. Your own lives. *That's* the plan.

FRED

And that's your time machine, right? The captain's .45.

KIM

You guys are joking, right? (Holds up cuffs) Unlock these things!

FEYNMAN

Can't do it. That letter is from Oppy. We looked for a more elegant solution but there's no time, no pun intended. We can't experiment here. This loop-singularity is interesting, maybe even more interesting than the project itself. But it threatens the entire war effort.

FRED

You *win* the war. *We* win the war!

FEYNMAN

So you tell me. But maybe that's because we close the loop. Who knows? Unfortunately, I'm not authorized to find out.

Feynman stops the Jeep. Pulls on the emergency brake with a LOUD RATCHETING SOUND. Leaves headlamps on.

Takes a clipboard off the dash and gets out of the Jeep.

FEYNMAN

We get out here. It's all set up. Come on, guys. Don't make this hard.

Fred and Kim look at each other grimly and refuse to move. They sit tight in the back of the Jeep, backlighted from the headlamps.

Feynman draws the .45 from his belt.

FEYNMAN

Come on, you won't feel a thing. I promise.

KIM

(angrily)

You can't even fucking drive, and you want us to believe you know how to use a gun!

FEYNMAN

Look, if we don't send you back the loop will stay open. It might even expand. Plus, you have your entire life to live in your own time. What are you going to do here? Join the Army?

KIM

(wants to believe it)

You sure it won't hurt?

FEYNMAN

I don't think so. This is a .45.

KIM

I know what the hell it is! (Still wants to believe) And we'll be back in our own time?

FEYNMAN

And this will never have happened. Think of it as a preview of life, before your life begins. I don't see how you could even remember it.

FRED

But then it *will* happen! We'll go on the hike and it will all happen again. Just like it's happening now.

FEYNMAN

Aha! The physics professor. Very perceptive — Fred, isn't it? That's the other part of the plan. Come up here, in the light.

Fred and Kim climb awkwardly and reluctantly out of the back of the Jeep. They follow Feynman to the front of the Jeep. Feynman hands Fred the clipboard.

FEYNMAN

Write yourself a letter telling yourself NOT to go on the hike. I'll mail it right before I die. When is it — approximately?

FRED

(bitterly)

Ten years ago. 1988. August. Cancer. A long, excruciating, painful death.

FEYNMAN

I don't blame you for being pissed off, Fred. But we all die, okay? How many of us get to live twice?

KIM

And die twice.

FEYNMAN

Well, that too. But you can't have one without the other. Come on!

Feynman hands Fred a pencil. Fred studies it in the dim light. It is printed with a slogan: "RICHARD DARLING, I LOVE YOU! PUTSY."

Fred looks at Feynman and relents. He tries to write but his right hand is cuffed to Kim.

FRED

I'm right-handed.

FEYNMAN

(to Kim)

You write it, then.

KIM

I'm left-handed.

FEYNMAN

Bullshit. Come on, guys, don't make this any harder than it is!

Fred holds the clipboard while Kim writes. Feynman lights a cigarette.

FEYNMAN

Don't get too specific. That might be dangerous.

KIM

How about, "Do not go hiking near Oak Ridge, November 17, 1998."

FEYNMAN

Don't mention Oak Ridge.

KIM

How about, "Do not leave Knoxville."

FEYNMAN

That should do it.

Feynman takes the clipboard. Kim's hands are shaking. Fred is cool, studying Feynman.

FRED

You didn't send it, did you?

FEYNMAN

Why don't you guys turn around? It's better for everybody if you turn around.

FRED

If you had sent it, all this would never happen. We wouldn't be here.

FEYNMAN

It's not that simple. Maybe time reverberates. Maybe there's a delay factor. Maybe —

FRED

Maybe you wanted to see what would happen.

FEYNMAN

(irritated)

I don't deny that it's possible. How should I know what went wrong? You're the guys from the future, not me. But we can and will fix it. Now turn around, dammit.

KIM

Don't I get a last cigarette?

FEYNMAN

We don't have time. Here, you can have the last drag of mine.

With a sudden, athletic move, Kim grabs the gun and wrenches it from Feynman's grasp. Now he holds the .45 on Feynman while Fred, handcuffed to Kim, watches with mingled relief, horror, fascination — and fear.

KIM

Surely you are joking, Mr. Feynman?

FEYNMAN

Come on, guys, this can never work. You *have* to go back, even if it's just to stop the trip. Otherwise, what're you gonna do, stay here and meet yourselves, over and over?

KIM

Beats a .45 slug in the back of the head. [Puts the gun in Feynman's face] Unlock these cuffs or I blow your fucking head off.

FEYNMAN

(opens hands, Christlike)

Go ahead. Pull the trigger. Blow away the Manhattan Project, the war effort, the entire future.

Fred puts his free hand on Kim's gun arm.

FRED

He's right, Kim. There must be a better way.

KIM

Better than what? No way I...

A SHOT. Kim falls dead — dragging Fred to his knees.

Fred looks up. He is startled to see HIMSELF, in an Army uniform, holding an M-1 carbine. FRED2 has just shot Kim in the back of the head.

FEYNMAN

I was beginning to wonder.

FRED2

You always wonder.

Fred2 bends down and pries the .45 from Kim's fingers and hands it to Feynman. Feynman takes the clip from his pocket and clicks it into the .45.

FRED

It — wasn't loaded?

FEYNMAN

No way. Time is elastic. You can't change the past or the future but you better be damn careful with the present. (Chambers a round and clicks off the safety) Now turn around, Fred. Seriously. Please.

FRED

Fuck you. (Looks from Feynman to Fred2) Fuck you both! If you're going to shoot me, do it like a man. Face to face.

Fred2 watches impassively, still holding the M-1. Fred tries to back away, dragging Kim's body.

FEYNMAN

I hate this part. I really do.

Feynman aims the .45 at Fred and closes his eyes, just as —

CLANG! Fred is hit from behind with a shovel and falls sprawling beside Kim's body.

KIM2 steps out of the shadows, also in uniform. Holding a GI foxhole shovel. He wipes off the shovel and puts it in the back of the Jeep.

Feynman looks at Fred2, who shakes his head. Feynman steps forward with the .45 and finishes off Fred with another LOUD BANG. Fred2 flinches.

Feynman sticks the .45 back in his belt. He lights a cigarette. His hands are shaking.

FEYNMAN

Did you finish digging?

KIM2

Don't I always finish digging?

He walks off into darkness.

FEYNMAN

Yeah, but this is the last time, I hope. I'll give you guys some light.

Feynman steps over to the Jeep and turns on the spotlight mounted on the

driver's side. Shines it into the woods to show a wide, shallow grave, freshly dug amid the trees.

Kim2 is dragging both bodies toward it by the short handcuff chain. He looks up like a deer caught in the spotlight.

Fred2 reaches over Feynman and turns off the spot *and* the headlights.

FRED2

It's easier in the dark.

FEYNMAN

Whatever.

KIM2 (o.s.)

Come on, Fred. I'll bury you but I'm not going to bury me. Too fucking creepy. By half.

FRED2

Okay okay.

Fred2 puts the M-1 in the Jeep and picks up the shovel. He walks off into the darkness, leaving Feynman alone in the dim light.

Sound of SHOVEL from O.S. Feynman sits on the Jeep; lights his last cigarette. Crumples the pack. Beats a bongo tattoo on the Jeep fender.

Kim2 appears at Feynman's side.

KIM2

One more.

FEYNMAN

(Shows the empty pack)

I'm out. I thought you were quitting, anyway.

Kim2 plucks the cigarette from Feynman's mouth.

KIM2

Very funny. That was now. This is then.

FEYNMAN

I just thought of something. Seriously, Kim. Maybe it's smoking now, before you're born, that makes it so hard to quit later. Think about it.

KIM2

Whatever.

After several long, luxuriant drags, Kim2 hands Feynman his cigarette and disappears into the shadows.

FRED2 (o.s.)

Okay. Ready?

KIM2 (o.s.)

I guess.

FRED2 (o.s.)

Okay!

FEYNMAN

Coming.

He checks the .45. Stubs out his cigarette on the hood of the Jeep. Field strips butt. Wipes ashes off hood. Walks off into the darkness.

KIM2 (o.s.)

You should have mailed the fucking letter.

FEYNMAN (o.s.)

Who says I won't this time? You shouldn't have grabbed the gun.

KIM2 (o.s.)

Surely you are joking, Mr. Feynman. Then you would have missed all this.


FRED2

Hey guys, can we just do it, once and for all, this time?

A SHOT. A flash of LIGHTNING. Another SHOT.

THUNDER and more LIGHTNING. The camera POV moves AWAY from the Jeep. Flashes of LIGHTNING reveal Feynman, a silhouette with a gun, looking down at the ground. He sticks the gun into his belt.

Then darkness and silence.

In the middle distance, the Jeep starts up. Headlights. A grinding of gears. The Jeep bucks away, awkwardly. 

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URSULA K. LE GUIN

SIX GREAT SF MOVIES THAT COULD BE MADE WITHOUT AUDIBLE EXPLOSIONS IN THE VACUUM OF SPACE

Philip K. Dick: *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?*

Yes, I know. There's *Blade Runner* that everybody else thinks is so great. But instead of another trendy-noir-violent-yawn consisting entirely of the cut to the chase, the book it misused could have been the basis of a fine movie with, like, people in it....

The Man in the High Castle could be pretty nifty, too.

Ursula K. Le Guin: *The Left Hand of Darkness*

All we need is a cast consisting of androgynous Inuits, plus maybe Michael Dorn, and Greenland. Scenes in the kemmerhouse could be really a *whole lot* of fun.

Vonda N. McIntyre: *The Moon and the Sun*

The whole thing has to be paced like Citation winning the Derby, and filmed at Versailles in the most absolutely gorgeous historical-flamboyant style, with absolutely gorgeous actors, especially the dwarf Count, the mermaid, and Louis the Fourteenth. It would be a joy and a delight.

C. J. Cherryh: *The Faded Sun*

All three books could be scripted into one truly beautiful space opera, with plenty of action, both duels and big cataclysms — but the soul of it would consist in our gradually getting drawn into an alien point of view, just as in the books. Shrines in canyons, ancient deserted cities, sandstorms — it has to be filmed in Utah: Arches, Canyonlands, Zion. (Maybe we could blow up Moab?)

H. G. Wells: *The First Men on the Moon*

A vivid, haunting nightmare, and now a great period piece, the book offers spectacular opportunities to a filmmaker with a sense of style and a sense of humor. The invention and testing of Cavorite — the wonderful scene of Dawn on the Moon — the cranky Brits — the horrid selenites in their horrid caves — Oh, come on, somebody do it! ♣



FILMS

JOHN KESSEL

WHO I'LL CAST WHEN THEY LET ME DIRECT...

The Stars My Destination,
by Alfred Bester

Gully Foyle/Geoffrey Fourmyle Mel
Gibson (#2: Michael Madsen)
Jisbella McQueen Geena Davis
Robin Wednesbury Jada Pinkett
Presteign Anthony Hopkins
Olivia Presteign Kate Winslet
Peter Y'ang-Yeovil Alec Baldwin
Saul Dagenham Harvey Keitel
Regis Sheffield Jeremy Irons
Rog Kempsey Kevin Bacon

The Man in the High Castle,
by Philip K. Dick

Frank Frink Ralph Fiennes
Ed McCarthy Kevin Bacon
Robert Childan Kevin Spacey
Mr. Baynes William Hurt
Nobusuke Tagomi John Lone
Paul Kasoura Winston Chao
General Tedeki Sihung Lung
Alex Lotze Tim Roth
Juliana Frink Uma Thurman
Joe Cinnadella Andy Garcia
Wyndham-Matson Gene Hackman
Hugo Reiss, Reichs Consul Michael
Caine
Hawthorne Abendsen .. Martin Sheen
Kreuz vom Meere, SD officer Bob
Hoskins

The Left Hand of Darkness,
by Ursula K. Le Guin

Genly Ai Laurence Fishburne
Therem Harth rem ir Estraven
..... Sigourney Weaver
King Argaven Glenn Close
Tibe Meryl Streep
Obsle Kathy Bates
Faxte the Weaver Jaye Davidson
The Pervert Kevin Bacon

The Book of the New Sun, by Gene Wolfe

Severian Leonardo Di Caprio
Thecla Helena Bonham Carter
Thea Joanna Going
Vodalus Andre Braugher
Master Gurloes John Hurt
Master Palemon Morgan Freeman
Dorcas Gabrielle Anwar
Agia Nicole Kidman
Agilus Kevin Bacon
Jolenta Julia Ormond
Dr. Talos Gary Oldman
Baldanders Arnold Schwarzenegger
Hildegrin Peter Postlethwaite
Hethor John Malkovich
The Autarch Kenneth Branagh

Red Mars, by Kim Stanley Robinson

Frank Chalmers .. Denzel Washington

Maya Toitovna	Michelle Pfeiffer
John Boone	Kevin Costner
Michel Duval	Daniel Auteuil
Sax Russell	John Turturro
Phyllis Boyle	Holly Hunter
Arkady Bogdanov	Gabriel Byrne
Nadia Cherneshevsky	Susan Sarandon
Hiroko Ai	Gong Li
Ann Clayborne	Angela Bassett
The Stowaway	Kevin Bacon

A Cantic for Leibowitz,
by Walter M. Miller, Jr.

Brother Francis Tim Robbins
 Abbot Arkos Ian Holm
 Wandering Jew F. Murray Abraham
 Abbot Dom Paolo James Earl Jones
 Thon Taddeo Samuel L. Jackson
 The Poet Jeff Goldblum
 Abbot Zerchi Albert Finney
 Doctor Cors Richard Gere
 Sick mother Rosie Perez
 Mrs. Grales/Rachel Anne
 Bancroft/Julie Delpy
 Brother Kevin Bacon

"All You Zombies —,"
by Robert A. Heinlein

Unmarried Mother ... Christian Slater
Bartender Jack Nicholson
Jane Liv Tyler
Man playing jukebox Kevin Bacon

Sarah Canary, by Karen Iov Fowler

Chin Ah Kin Jason Scott Lee
Adelaide Dixon Bridget Fonda
Sarah Canary Anjelica Huston
B.J. Tom Hulce
Harold Bill Pullman

Purdy Kevin Bacon

Think Like a Dinosaur,
by James Patrick Kelly

Kamala Shastri Sarita Choudhury
Michael Burr Ewan McGregor
Voice of Silloin James Earl Jones
Voice of Linna Ben Kingsley
Voice of Parikkal Kevin Bacon

Gun, with Occasional Music,
by Jonathan Lethem

Conrad Metcalf Nicolas Cage
Celeste Stanhunt Juliette Binoche
Orton Angwine Joaquin Phoenix
Pansy Greenleaf Emily Watson
Grover Testafer David Paymer
Inquisitor Kornfeld Kevin Bacon
Inq. Morgenlander Bruce Willis
Catherine Teleprompter Jennifer
Jason Leigh
Walter Surface Joe Pesci
Danny Phoneblum Marlon Brando
Joey Castle Ray Liotta

Finally, with apologies...

Corrupting Dr. Nice,
by John Kessel

Owen Vannice John Cusack
Genevieve Faison ... Gwyneth Paltrow
August Faison Gerard Depardieu
Simon Gabriel Byrne
Rosethrush Vannice ... Anjelica Huston
Ralph Vannice John Goodman
Lance Thrillkiller James Woods
Detlev Gruber Alec Baldwin
Parker Kevin Bacon
Yeshu Robert De Niro
Wilma Industrial Light and Magic





FILMS

KATHI MAIO

DEEP SPACE, RIGHT HERE AT HOME

IN HIS CLASSIC of science non-fiction, *The Immense Journey*, Loren Eiseley called it "the sole world on the planet which we can enter only by a great act of the imagination." He also called it "a night world that few men have entered and from whose greatest depths none have returned alive."

That world is the deep space right here on Mother Earth: the abyss of the ocean.

It's been more than forty years since Eiseley's book was published. In that time, technology has developed at a prodigious rate. And what we know about our world — and others — has expanded mightily. Still, Eiseley's words remain true. We know shockingly little about ninety-nine percent of Earth's living space — the two-thirds of our planet's surface that is covered by

water. And as for the abyssal depths, *still* no person has visited that realm....and lived to tell the tale.

The depths of the ocean is, of course, a hostile environment for people — and even for our machines. At its deepest point (over 35,800 feet) the pressure is over eight tons per square inch. Which, I hear tell, is the equivalent of one person trying to support fifty jumbo jets.

This challenge continues to thwart oceanographers, marine biologists, not to mention mining and petroleum interests, who would love to explore this home-grown alien world. Small passenger submersibles aren't even close to making it all the way down. And tethered ROVs (remotely operated vehicles) can make it to some of the ocean floor, but not to its deepest points. Current research is focusing on small AUVs (autonomous underwater vehicles) that can use

the latest in artificial intelligence and telecommunication networking, along with an array of data-collecting sensors, to explore deeper and deeper.

But, who knows when we'll get there? And who knows how many species of swimming things exist that we still don't know about? This past February, a National Geographic special, entitled "Sea Monsters: Search for the Giant Squid," illustrated the problem. One of the marine biologists profiled on the show, Dr. Clyde Roper, has devoted his entire career to the study of the *Architeuthis* and the other largest cephalopods. Only trouble is, although he's seen a few corpses — the largest ever recovered was sixty feet in length — Roper has never seen a *living* giant squid. And neither has anyone else.

To remedy this, an international team of scientists are searching for the giant squid in a deep-sea ecosystem off New Zealand. There, they are employing the latest technologies, like a "crittercam" (developed by Greg Marshall) which can be attached to the back of the giant squid's known predator, the sperm whale. If humans can't get down to the right depths, they figure they'll let something that *can* dive really deep take the video for

them. Maybe they'll get lucky. Only, so far, they haven't.

In an anticlimactic conclusion — which captures the reality of scientific field work more truthfully than your average National Geographic broadcast — the "search" for the "sea monster" comes up empty. After a lifetime of trying, Dr. Roper still hasn't seen a living giant squid. And he still doesn't, he freely admits, have any idea "exactly where they live, how they live...whether they live in pairs, alone, in schools, or what they eat." In other words, although he's a world-renowned expert, who's spent years studying and researching *The Beast* (as Peter Benchley called it when he had it gobble up folks off the coast of Bermuda), Roper still knows diddly-squat.

I must admit to being astounded by the show. I had no idea that we were still so ignorant about the giant squid. After all, our sea tales and mythology, and scores of deep-sea adventure movies, are filled with battles between humans and the giant "kraken."

But that's the point. Our mythologies have always been a potent brew of the known and the unknown. Fear fills in the blanks of our knowledge, and takes shape at the edge of the charted world. Since

medieval cartographers had no idea what lay beyond visited shores, they scrawled "Here Be Monsters" at the borderlines. And we are still doing the same thing, in stories, movies, and TV miniseries. We know that the giant squid exists, and that it has the largest (known) eye on earth, as well as a large, parrot-like beak. But because we know little else, *Architeuthis* remains a nightmarish fantasy: a Jabberwork, waiting in the deep, with "jaws that bite."

Likewise, because the sea is a "great unknown" that we can all stick our toes into, it is the perfect subject for speculative writers...and for sf filmmakers, since the earliest days of the motion picture.

Although his landmark film fantasy *A Trip to the Moon* (1902) is much better known, Georges Milihs also did one of the first adaptations of Jules Verne's *20,000 Leagues Under the Sea*, in 1907. I say "one of" because it is believed that another screen adaptation of Verne's classic, now lost, predated Milihs by two years.

But for most of us, the 1954 Disney version, directed by Richard Fleischer, and written by Earl Felton, is the one we recall — whether we saw it on the big screen, television or videotape. With its

struggle between the complex, embittered genius (James Mason's Captain Nemo) and the uncomplicated manly man (Kirk Douglas's Ned Land), this adaptation can be looked upon as an intriguing rumination upon masculinity in modern times. But few people bother to seek the film's sociological significance, with all those exciting underwater shots to goggle over. As well as the thrilling hand to tentacle battle with — you guessed it — a giant squid.

With its impressive special effects and production values, Disney's *20,000 Leagues Under the Sea* is certainly one of the great classic abyssal adventure flicks. And there are a few other memorable entries like *Voyage to the Bottom of the Sea* (1961 — with another giant squid attack). But, let's face it, most deep-sea sf/fantasy films have always been low-budget creature features with few oceanic scenes — too expensive. Instead, pals like Godzilla rose up from the sea and came to us. Those old horror movies include, among many others, *Beast from 20,000 Fathoms* (1953), *Monster from the Ocean Floor* (1954), and *Gorgo* (1961).

Oddly, it was the success of *Alien* (1979) that seemed to generate new interest in making science fiction-horror films that would

bring the humans into the sea-monster's underwater environment. *Alien* clones like *DeepStar Six* (1988) and *Leviathan* (1989) represent this phenomenon, which was clustered at the end of the eighties.

But to see a really impressive science fiction film that makes full use of its deep-sea environment without relying on creature feature cheap scares, I'd have to say that *The Abyss*, James Cameron's 1989 "failure," still leads the way.

I am hoping that the regrettable cultural event and box-office bonanza that is *Titanic* will encourage some of the film's swooning, tear-stained, and exhausted viewers to hunt down Cameron's earlier sea tale. As you can tell, I was personally not thrilled by *Titanic*'s overlongschmaltzy story. But I did like the framing device that Cameron used, including eerie real (and some restaged) shots of the decaying luxury liner in its watery grave.

Many a soul is asleep in the deep, but Cameron's characters took a little too long to get there. I much preferred the adult love story of *The Abyss*. And those inquisitive sea "worms" and those nifty stingray alien "angels" held my imagination much more than the formally-attired Mr. Guggenheim's watery fate.

So, I missed the boat when it comes to loving *Titanic*. (And I'm definitely not looking forward to the second coming of the Irwin Allen-style disaster movie which will, no doubt, be ushered in by Cameron's ill-fated *Ship's* success.) But that doesn't mean that I wouldn't be happy to see a revitalized interest in deep-sea sf film.

Unfortunately, the two seafaring sf/fantasy movies that followed *Titanic* into theaters do not bode well for such a trend. The first up was *Deep Rising*, which is actually the better of the two, if only because of its exceedingly modest ambitions.

Deep Rising is an unabashed creature feature, not unlike those dubious '50s classics like *It Came from Beneath the Sea* or *The Attack of the Crab Monsters*. Only difference is, this monster doesn't bother to come to shore. It attacks a no-name cast out over the South China Sea, on board an ultra-luxurious ocean liner on its maiden voyage.

Yes, it's chomp-the-*Titanic*-time. (An iceberg is way too passive.) For this flick, however, poor *Architeuthis* doesn't get the nod as the demon from the deep. Writer/Director Stephen Sommers instead created a hybrid fantasy monster,

based, in part, on the Bell jellyfish, the vampire squid, and giant sea anemones. His grab-bag bogey is, indeed, mighty impressive. Computer animation has gotten so good, and so affordable, that even a relatively economical movie like this one can create one scary critter.

But that's about all this movie has going for it. The cast, led by Treat Williams, is game (in both senses of the word). But they don't have that much to do except for cracking an occasional wisecrack, running hither and thither, shooting off ineffectual machine-gun fire, and eventually getting gobbled by gigantic tentacle mouths that "drink" their human victims. (And this monster, like most, doesn't know when to push away from the table. It's capable of eating the entire populace of a packed cruise ship in a single sitting.)

You might wonder why a sea creature would have such a voracious and exclusive appetite for human flesh. But if you ask that kind of question of this kind of movie, you shouldn't be watching it.

Deep Rising is a dumb, old-fashioned monster movie. Silly fun for them that like blood and gore on every wall, crunching skulls underfoot, and a relentless parade of terrified people turned into lunch

by a very hungry sea-fiend. For me, that fear-flight-relief-die rhythm that this type of movie falls into becomes tedious very quickly, indeed. Unless there are some interesting themes or challenging characters — neither of which are to be found in *Deep Rising* — I become bored. (Tense, grossed-out, but bored.)

I had much higher hopes for *Sphere*. Here was a movie that had not only *name* people, but *quality name* people attached to it. The cast includes Dustin Hoffman, Sharon Stone, and Samuel L. Jackson. And the director is the talented Barry Levinson (*Wag the Dog*, *Rain Man*). But the writers, there's where the warning lights went off. There were just too many of them. Stephen Hauser (before this big break, Levinson's assistant) and the more experienced Paul Attanasio (*Donnie Brasco*) are credited with the screenplay. And another newcomer, Kurt Wimmer, is credited with the adaptation. And they were all fiddling with one of Michael Crichton's least-impressive novels. (And that's saying a lot.)

Nonetheless, *Sphere*, the movie, starts out very strong. Psychologist Norman Goodman is asked to counsel some plane-crash victims. But when he arrives at the

supposed crash-site, he finds that it is in the middle of the Pacific, and there is nary a "victim" in sight. Just lots of fancy military ships and closed-mouthed men.

Norman soon learns that the pursuit of a quick academic buck can come back to haunt you. An intelligence agent named Barnes (Peter Coyote) is using a report of Norman's as a "bible" for establishing contact protocols with alien lifeforms. It's flattering, but foolhardy. For Norman wrote the report solely for the promised honorarium. It is filled with fiction (borrowed from the *Twilight Zone* and Isaac Asimov), speculation, and a "welcome-wagon" personnel list drawn from Norman's friends and colleagues.

They include Beth Halperin (Stone), a biochemist, Harry Adams (Jackson), a mathematician, and Ted Fielding (Liev Schreiber), an astrophysicist. The four scientists and Barnes are soon on their way to the depths of the Pacific, to take up temporary residence in an underwater habitat. Their mission: to enter and investigate a giant spacecraft that appears, from the coral grown up upon it, to have been on the ocean floor for almost 300 years.

Up to the point that the crew enters the mysterious craft, *Sphere*

is a first-class movie. There is suspense, humor, and a talented cast making the most of their underwritten roles. But as soon as the crew enters the downed spaceship, the movie starts to slip away.

Levinson is good with actors and dialogue. And *Sphere* has plenty of chatter in it, but little of it illuminates the characters or the plot. Needless to say, inside the ship the crew finds a large sphere, gold and shimmering, that seems to have an odd effect on those who've touched (or entered) it. And, for that matter, anyone in the general neighborhood.

The concept is that this big alien bauble somehow causes the human mind to manifest its deepest fears. Sound familiar? It ought to. Think the id-amok of *Forbidden Planet* (1956), or the ominous ocean of *Solaris* (1972).

But those two superior movies recognize something that *Sphere* doesn't seem to get, and that is that people's greatest fears have to do with our relationships with other people. It's interpersonal angst — regret, jealousy, longing, love — that haunt our dreams, and dominate our lives. And that's with or without supernatural manifestations.

Forget about lost loves who committed suicide (as in *Solaris*),

the crew of *Sphere* seems to manifest sea creatures (and other calamities) that mostly kill people they don't even know. For example, early on, a school of jellyfish — unlike any on earth — attack and kill one of the habitat's two-person crew, played by Queen Latifah. Exactly who manifested these creatures, and why they sicced them on a perfectly nice crewwoman, is never explained. And neither is much of anything else.

In a scene like the jellyfish swarming, *Sphere* acts like an unimaginative horror film. (You know, the kind where if you're a racial or ethnic minority, and not a big star, the monster is sure to dispatch you in the first reel.) But Levinson isn't particularly good at standard horror. In another terror scene, the traditional giant squid comes to call. But we never even see this particular killer calamari, except as some grainy blips on a sonar screen. Big terror, that.

And, as crucial as the sphere itself is supposed to be, a big shiny ball doesn't have much personality as a demon force. It doesn't help that we never get to see inside of it, or get a clue as to what it is, or why

it is here. It's lonely, we learn. (It's been buried in the ocean for almost 300 years.) And it's overjoyed at the chance to chat, via a habitat monitor, with new friends. But if it's so happy to have new playmates, why does it do a cheap impersonation of HAL and send messages like "I Will Kill You All" to the crew? And, since it flies away in the end, why did it passively stay in the deep, all alone, for so long?

I was utterly confused by the end of *Sphere*. And equally dispirited. *Sphere* should have been so much better. Its production design is excellent. Its special effects are impressive without being showy. This project had all the resources to make a fine film, and it squandered them all, for want of a cogent screenplay.

In *Sphere*'s final scene, the surviving leads hold hands in a little energy circle, and will themselves into forgetting what they had just seen. I wish those of us in the audience could have done the same. And while we were at it, we could have used our powers to summon forth a fantasy/sf film that honors the mystery and majesty of kraken's world.





FILMS

HOWARD WALDROP

FIVE MORE SF BIOPICS WE DON'T NEED (AND THE SPINS AND HIGH CONCEPTS THAT WILL BE PUT ON THEM)

1. *What's It All About?*

Guy comes in a bar every night, tells long weird stories (as films-within-the-film) to the bartender (Kevin Bacon). One's about a man (John Malkovich) and his maybe-killer android (Wallace Shawn); one's about a guy who does weird stuff to keep the universe in balance (Judge Reinhold); one about a guy who uses teleportation to get revenge on people who didn't come to his aid after a space *naufnage* (Michael J. Pollard). One night the guy doesn't show up; turns out the guy died; he was a famous sf writer and left the bartender *everything*. Written by Quentin Tarantino, directed by James Ivory.

A cross between the TV sitcom *Cheers* and *Melvin and Howard*.

2. *Nobody Kicks Earth!*

Story of a space opera writer (Drew Carey) who becomes the editor of the top sf magazine in the '30s; an opinionated, irascible, voluble man ("Face it, Ike. Slaves weren't *meant* to be free!") with a difficult first marriage ("Shouldn't you two be in Atlantic City by now?") who nevertheless changes the field and gets lots of respect. With Dean Stockwell as "Hieronymous Dean" the inventor. Cameos: Johnny Depp as F. Orlin Tremaine, Iggy Pop as Theodore Sturgeon, Josh Mostel as Isaac Asimov, Angela Cartwright as C. L. Moore and Wallace Shawn as Henry Kuttner. Written by Paul Schrader, directed by John Milius.

A three-way cross between *Mishima*, *Red Dawn*, and *The Sheltering Sky*.

3. *That Bright Pink Light*

About a writer who took enough drugs to kill the entire membership of the SFWA and *still* managed to act like a paranoid schizophrenic while turning out strange good books and bad strange books. Starring Wings Hauser, with Bob Newhart as the

voice of the V(aria)le) A(nnuity) L(ife) I(n)surance) S(alesman) ("The difference between you and most guys, Phil, is that when they see the bright pink light, they smile and open another beer."). With Tim Powers (as James Blaylock) and James Blaylock (as Tim Powers); K. W. Jeter and Michael Bishop as themselves (they think). Meg Tilly in multiple roles as wives and girlfriends, and Wallace Shawn as The Thing In The Sky. Written by Mel Brooks, directed by Richard Benjamin.

A cross between *Drugstore Cowboy* and *Song of Bernadette*.

4. *Go Ask Tip*

Tori Spelling in the role of a lifetime as a woman whose regular life — on safaris in Africa at six, OSS agent in WWII, employed by the CIA, experimental psychologist, artist — wasn't enough, and who late in life took a male *nom de plume* and began to write great sf stories. You woulda thought she'd killed everybody's puppies when it was revealed that "he" was a "she." With Harry Dean Stanton as "Linebarger, the guy at the office," and Wallace Shawn as one of the snoops who blew the cover. Same ending as the Robert E. Howard biopic. Screenplay by Joan Didion, directed by Penny Marshall.

A three-way cross between *Victor/Victoria*, *Three Days of the Condor*, and *It's A Wonderful Life*.

5. *Of Time and the Miskatonic* (video title: *Play Miskatonic for Me*)

Brad Pitt is H. P. Lovecraft! Wallace Shawn is Houdini! With Anthony Hopkins as Farnsworth Wright and Frances McDormand as Sonia Greene, and the Big Blackfoot River as the Miskatonic. Screenplay by the Coen brothers, directed by Albert Brooks.

A cross between *Tom and Viv* and *Pulp Fiction*.





FILMS

PAT CADIGAN

TEN SF/FANTASY/GENRE FILMS THAT SHOULD NOT HAVE BEEN MADE

GORDON VAN GELDER asked me to compile a list of sf/fantasy/genre movies that should not have been made, with full knowledge of how potentially offensive the result could be. So I'm going to tell you right now: he asked *me*, to speak for *me*.

He did not ask me to speak for *you*, for *him*, or for your Aunt Minnie. If my comments offend you, you can complain but frankly, I don't care. I don't have to. And to be honest, if I'd known how much I would be offending you, I'd have spoken up sooner. These are *movies*, for god's sake.

1. *Dune*

Enumerating the reasons this bow-wow should not have been loosed on the world is an exercise in finding out exactly how obsessive-compulsive you are — days later, you're still thinking of more in your spare moments. I'll confine myself to those that immediately come to mind:

- A) The sandworm rodeo/surfing invitational — Yeehaw!
- B) Many terms/names that great sf writers invent should never be spoken aloud — e.g., "Muad Dib," "Usul," "Kwisatz Hederach," and "gom jabbar." Especially "gom jabbar," when spoken by a small girl whose voice sounds as if it has been dubbed by an adult imitating a small girl.
- C) Any movie that requires the cast to be costumed such that they have to have equipment hanging out of their noses is trying too hard.
- D) The Harkonnen emperor's plague of boils.
- E) Dean Stockwell in smudged lipstick.
- F) Interstellar travel via projectile vomiting.
- G) Sting scantily clad for only a few minutes, and not the whole movie.

2. *Alien Resurrection*

Can you say, "The cash cow needs milking"? Actually, the cash cow didn't need milking; the milkers were looking for something to do with their hands.

- A) *Alien 3* was bad enough without compounding the offense.
- B) Identification via halitosis.
- C) They killed the sexiest pirate first.
- D) Sigourney Weaver's manicure.
- E) No one was bright enough to think of dumping the *Alien* plot and just writing a story to showcase the pirates. Especially the sexy one.

3. Event Horizon

Sometimes, high concept — "Hey, feature this: *Hellraiser* in space!" — is just a party game, and only funny if you're drunk.

- A) Life-support/suspended animation/what-the-hell-was-it-supposed-to-be-anyway entirely too messy.
- B) Cutesy-poo crew nicknames — whose brainstorm was *that*?
- C) What cause? What effect? More cgi and they won't notice!

4. Independence Day

I'm sure that the entire world is slavishly grateful to the US for giving them an independence day to celebrate, too. No, don't thank us, world — the look on your face is enough.

- A) Intelligent life smart enough to build interstellar spacecraft, but too dumb to shield its computers from viruses.
- B) Violation of Law of Extreme Coincidences: "Aliens invading? Why, we just happen to have one of their spacecraft in an underground parking garage in Area 51." Even Mulder would look askance.
- C) Memo to Data: after spending a *Star Trek* series as an android, a stretch involves playing a human being, not a cartoon; chastise your agent.
- D) Ends up looking like an expensive rip-off of *Mars Attacks!*, whether it is or not.

5. Combination Plate # 1: *Field of Dreams*, *Waterworld*, and *The Postman*

Kevin Costner is living out his fantasy of being a brave and rugged yet sincere and sensitive hero. There is nothing inherently wrong in this per se, but on this scale, it tends to suggest narcissism as a severe and untreatable personality disorder. The cinematic equivalent of a beautifully designed, highly expensive dustwrapper on a vanity-press volume of bad poetry, including tipped-in color plates of author's own illustrations, produced in signed, limited edition of 6,000,000.

- A) *Field of Dreams* indicates Madonna had his number all along.
- B) *Waterworld* indicates Costner slept through Geology 101.
- C) *The Postman* indicates Costner is still asleep.

6. Combination Plate #2: *Jurassic Park* and *The Lost World*

Too-obvious product placement is merely tacky, using a movie to display that movie's own tie-in products is beyond the pale. My son the Bobmeister actively

rejected anything with a Jurassic Park/Lost World logo on it, for that very reason: "I'll decide what I'm greedy for — Stephen Spielberg doesn't think for me!"

- A) Cutesy-poo dinosaurs with allergies — when did you last meet an iguana with hayfever? (Oh, stop, you did not.)
- B) Outhouse joke improperly placed — it's not from the Jurassic, it's antediluvian.
- C) Anorexic tyrannosaur that loses so much weight during the course of the film that it goes from shaking the earth to being able to sneak up on people sets bad dieting example for young people already obsessed with being thin. Ditto bulimic lizards.
- D) *The Lost World* — "Something has survived." Yeah, no one saw *that* coming; as easy to miss as an anorexic tyrannosaur.

7. Combination Plate #3: *Michael* and *Phenomenon*

Acting out vanity fantasies is one thing; using movies as vehicles to hint that you are/can be genuinely superhuman, possibly divine, is vile.

- A) Phenomenon rhymes with Algernon, as in "Flowers for." Coincidence?
- B) Travolta's mini-Last Supper scene with children and apple — Last Snack — is possibly too subtle for anyone except Scientologists.
- C) Andie McDowell says to William Hurt the same thing I said when she first appeared onscreen: "Oh, it's you. I thought you'd gone."
- D) Heartless tabloid editor wants Andie McDowell only for — kinky sex? No! Her dog-walking ability! Yeah, that's just like a heartless tabloid editor.
- E) Barflies find dancing angel irresistible. How many pinheads danced on that angel?

8. Combination Plate #4: *Mimic* and *The Relic*

Oh, never mind. I can never tell them apart. They both taste like turkey.

9. Combination Plate #5: *Star Trek* 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7 — 15 — 28 — 39 —

When will this punishment end — when the number of sequels equals the collective age of the original cast? Isn't it bad enough that Leonard Nimoy recanted and said he was Spock after all? Note to *TNG* and *DS9* casts: don't bother running from the Borg — you've already been assimilated. Note to the Borg: resistance is futile. You *will* be assimilated, just like the Klingons.

10. *The Jackal*

Not strictly a genre movie — at least, not this genre — but egregious enough to merit mention. If Bruce Willis wants to play the cool assassin character from the original movie, he can wait till the game comes out on the Playstation, just like the rest of us.

PS: Yes, I know. But that's Ms. Bitch to you. ☹

Although he has lived in Connecticut for many years, Ron Goulart hails from California and worked in La-La Land before moving east. The experience clearly left a mark on him, since many of his stories are set there, including his most recent novel, Groucho Marx, Master Detective. And of course there's this new story as well, which seems like a perfect way to conclude our foray into the fantasy world of Hollywood...with a bit of magic and some of that ol' razzle-dazzle. Lights, please...

The Curse of the Demon

By Ron Goulart

IT WASN'T REALLY AN earthquake that caused the ground to open up and swallow the second most popular child star in Hollywood. But

during the period of national mourning that followed the incident, Dan Barner didn't feel it would be wise, or in any way helpful to his screen writing career, to speak out and explain what actually had taken place. The notion that the cute, freckle-faced twelve-year-old that they knew and loved as Kenny McNulty was a complete and total fraud wouldn't have set well with the movie-going public.

Besides which, if Dan had mentioned that he'd precipitated the whole business by releasing a demonic spirit from an ancient bronze chest, it would most certainly have given rise to serious doubt as to his sanity. And while being considered eccentric can sometimes help forward a career in movies, a reputation for being totally bonkers is almost always a handicap.

Dan had come into possession of the venerable casket, which was

about the size of a shoe box and etched all over with blurred mystical symbols, on a chill, rainy evening early last year. He hadn't the slightest premonition that it would lead him to fame and fortune or that the battered old metal box would cause the disruption of the Oscar award ceremonies this year.

He was residing in a ramshackle cottage in a weedy cul-de-sac on the outskirts of Westwood at the time the fateful chest entered his life. The cottage, which was surfaced with stucco the color of peach yogurt, was all his second wife had left him after she'd divorced him a year and a half ago and he still had sixteen more years of mortgage payments to go. The lawn had long since died.

Dan was close to being forty-one, although he still wrote thirty-eight on any form that asked for his age. That particular stormy night he was sitting at his desk in his narrow den, hunched, scowling at his portable electric typewriter. For several weeks now it had refused to print the letter B. The lopsided desk was piled high with the various versions of the opening scenes of the new screenplay he was working on.

Last autumn, during a 6.3 quake, all the books had come tumbling down off the shelves. Dan, who'd been in an emotional slump for quite some time, had left the two hundred some books, mostly old paperbacks, sprawled exactly where they'd landed.

Tonight, as the heavy rain slammed down on the imitation thatch roof, tiny pearls of water were dripping down through the crack in the peach colored ceiling and hitting at a pile of old Cold War spy thrillers. The only things on the warped wooden book shelves were a framed photo of his first wife in her high school graduation robe and a bunch of dusty wax grapes.

The phone rang.

Jerking upright out of the slight doze he'd been nodding into, Dan grabbed up the phone. "Yeah, hello."

"This is a very complex and stressful town, Danny. I don't like to return to my palatial office after a grueling day on the show business barricades, you understand, and find cryptic messages on my tape. Brain teasers that deflect me from concentrating."

"Scotty, the message I left was, and I quote, 'What did Gonzer say about *The Carioca Backlog*!'"

"See what I mean? What in the name of Billy Budd is *The Carioca Backlog*? And who in the hell is Gonzer?"

"Well, Gonzer, according to you, is the new head of Firebrand Pictures and, Jesus, Scotty, *The Carioca Backlog* is the spec script you're supposed to be peddling for me. It's the thriller, remember, with the perfect part for Jessica Lange."

"Oh, that's right. I remember the script now. Terrific story arc. And the setting is terrific, too — Norway during the last days of the Cold War, Jessica'll look marvelous in a parka and — "

"It takes place in Brazil during World War II."

"Right, even better," said Scotty Blackett. "Now give me another helpful hint: Who's Gonzer again?"

"He runs Firebrand."

"Where'd you hear that?"

"From you," he told his agent.

Blackett produced a perplexed noise. "Nope, I think the actual head of Firebrand is Hugo Washburn. Yeah, right, I saw his damned name in *Variety* only yesterday."

"Then why the hell did you tell me somebody named Gonzer was hot for my script?"

"Yelling at the top of your lungs, Danny, is also something I don't need at the end of a day during which I've been busting my backside to sell a script by a fellow who possesses no screen credits to his name."

"That wasn't anywhere near the top," he assured the agent. "And I wrote, remember, *Birdbath III*?"

"They only made two of those before calling it quits."

"Three."

"People aren't interested in animal pictures anymore."

"*Birdbath III* was a horror movie."

"Worse, horror's dead in the water. I'd do a lot better with an animal script. I was telling Gonzer only this morning that — "

"Gonzer! Who is he then?"

"Oh, that's right — my barber," remembered the agent. "Anyhow, Danny, it is looking really good on *The Tapioca Backlash*. Don't despair. I'll be talking to Medlum at Firebrand again in the morning and he — "

"Who exactly is Medlum?"

"He's — Oops. Got another call. Keep that fiery temper of yours under control. Bye."

Hanging up the phone, forlornly, Dan returned to contemplating his ailing typewriter.

He was still in that hunched, slightly squinting position when the doorbell made that harsh raspberry sound it produced instead of chimes these days.

As Dan made his way across the sprawls of books, an anxious thumping commenced on the front door.

Nancy Quillen was a slim, pretty, redheaded young woman. Bundled in a lime green raincoat, she remained on Dan's doorstep and refused his invitation to cross the threshold. "Can't, I'm late for an audition," she explained, holding out a heavy cloth shopping bag in both hands. "Could you take this, keep it for a while, maybe open what's inside. But, please, do that after I've left."

"What exactly is in it?"

She glanced back over her shoulder. Behind her the heavy night rain was pounding at his small patch of dead lawn and a mournful wind was moving through the weeds. "Oh, just an old metal box," she said, pushing the bag, held at arm's length, closer to him.

He didn't immediately accept it. "Is there something wrong with this box?"

Nancy bent, setting the heavy gray bag on his threadbare doormat. "Probably not, no. But you're just about the only level-headed friend I have and that's why I made up my mind you're the perfect person to...um ...investigate."

He squatted, started to reach into the shadowy interior of the cloth shopping bag. "Might as well take a — "

"Don't!" suggested the red-haired actress, taking a step back. "What I mean is, Dan, why not do that after I've gotten a few blocks away — okay?"

"A bomb?"

"No, no, nothing like that, no." She gave a very unconvincing laugh. "It's, actually, a legacy. Something I inherited. Just, in fact, this afternoon."

He stood up, watching the bag. "Somebody left you what's in there in a will?"

"Not to me exactly." She took another careful step backward. "Apparently, according to the attorney who delivered it — a very nice old gentleman named Chester A. Tripple. He was ninety-three."

"Was?"

"Well, yes. He died in my living room shortly after stopping by. On that Morris chair we got at the garage sale in Glendale last summer. Ruined the darn chair."

"How did he ruin it, Nancy?"

"He didn't, poor old fellow. It was the flames that did most of the damage."

"This venerable old attorney caught fire, did he?"

"The chair caught fire after the lightning bolt hit Mr. Tripple. Funny thing about that. What I mean is, it *is* a stormy day and all but there hadn't been any thunder or lightning to speak of. Then — *wham!* — this huge bolt of sizzling blue lightning seemed to come in under my front door and hit old Mr. Tripple smack in the chest. He said, 'Good gracious, the curse of the demon!' and that was it for him. Some lightning spilled over and smacked my chair." Nancy paused, taking a slow deep breath. "I've really, Dan, had one heck of an afternoon. Did you ever try to explain to 911 that you had an old gentleman struck by lightning in your living room? I put the fire out myself with that little extinguisher we bought at the flea market that time, but then the landlady came up just as the ambulance and the police got there and she complained about the damage to her rug."

Dan requested, "Explain to me about how you came to inherit this thing."

"Well, according to poor old Mr. Tripple — he was very spry and lucid for someone so along in years — at least in the five or six minutes before the lightning got him — according to this lawyer, who'd journeyed all the way from the Midwest to track me down and present me with the chest, a distant cousin of mine died about eight or nine years ago. He left his various belongings to his next of kin. The thing is, Mr. Tripple had been having a heck of a rough time getting any of the heirs to accept things. It seems this Elijah Higgardy — that's my cousin and I never heard of him until today — it seems he had a reputation for being...um...eccentric."

"Eccentric how?"

"Mr. Tripple was about to go into details when the lighting bolt struck," replied Nancy. "I think, however, that he must have dabbled in sorcery and black magic." Reaching inside her raincoat, she produced a wrinkled, dirt-smeared envelope. "There's a note from Cousin Elijah in here — and a page torn out of a very old book. It sort of explains the chest."

"And what exactly do you want me to do, Nancy?"

"All you really have to do, if you would, is keep the darn thing for me for a while." She took two steps back. "But, listen, if you'd like to read over this material and then take a crack at opening the chest — well, I'd really appreciate that." She thrust the envelope at him.

Gingerly, he accepted it. "You're expecting me to be whapped by lightning."

"No, of course not. We've been close friends for over a year," she reminded. "I wouldn't put you in jeopardy. No, what I thought was, since you're the only brave and stalwart person I know at present — Well, I hoped you could find out if what the letter says is true. I'm sort of scared to try myself."

He fluttered the envelope. "What does the letter say?"

"That whoever uses what's inside the chest will find fame and fortune."

"That can't be what frightens you."

"No, it's the part where he warns about dire peril and the risk of eternal damnation."

INDOR LIGHTNING can be unnerving, especially when it comes in a variety of colors. Dan discovered that fact about a half hour after Nancy had entrusted the bronze chest to him.

Initially he had, handling it very cautiously, picked up the cloth shopping bag by the handles and lugged it into his small disorderly living room. It made a deep hollow thunk when he dropped it down near the door.

The temperature in the room seemed to drop suddenly, though that may have been because the door had been standing open while Nancy worked at persuading him to become the guardian of the possibly cursed object.

"Yeah, what did that expiring lawyer mean by 'the curse of the demon?'" he asked himself as he perched on the edge of his worn sofa, several feet from the bag, to watch it for a while. "I should've asked her. And also why all those other heirs refused to touch her cousin's bequest with a barge pole."

Noticing the dirty envelope he was clutching — the name of the law firm, Tripple, DeHaven & Worth, was printed in the left-hand corner — Dan placed it on his knee. After a moment, he opened it and fished out the two pieces of paper it held.

The note from Elijah Higgardy was written in faded fountain pen ink on a sheet of lined notebook paper. The book page was printed on heavy paper, much foxed and stained by time. Across the top of the pages was the title of the book it had been torn from — *The Most Dark & Evil Life of the Notorious Count Monstrodamus, Vile Black Sorcerer & Degenerate Villain.*

"Not a puff bio apparently." Setting the page on the cushion next to him, he returned his attention to the note.

To whomsoever inherits this miraculous chest from me (it said), I assure you that the entity contained within it can bring you, as it did me, great wealth and, should such be your desire, considerable fame. It once, so I was reliably informed, belonged to the notorious seventeenth-century mystic and magus known as Count Monstrodamus. There are some who say he came to a bad end as a result of tampering with such entities as that contained in this cask. Others, however, contend the count was torn limb from limb not by demons but by irate townspeople who believed him to be in cahoots with the devil.

To enlist the aid of the entity, you are to say, very slowly and clearly and paying close attention to your diction, "I summon you, O dark presence, to enter my world and do my bidding."

You must be careful to take the upper hand at all times, otherwise there is a possibility of dire peril and even eternal damnation. Good luck to you.

Dan read the letter through a second time, saying the dire peril and eternal damnation part aloud and scowling. Then he set the note aside and picked up the book page. It contained a brief account, in what sounded like 19th Century prose, of the box, referred to as the Accursed Cask of Hell,

and the many uses the count was alleged to have had for it. One sentence especially impressed Dan. "This most evil and perfidious person," wrote the unknown biographer, "entertained within his demented heart vain pretensions to be a successful playwright, and to that end, it is reliably stated, he did use the creature of the casket to persuade a respected theater owner of his day to produce his loathsome and blasphemous five-act tragedy, *The Bride of the Evil One; or, All for Satan.*"

Standing, taking up the note again, Dan, moving slowly, approached the bag. "Would that work today on movie producers? *The Carioca Backlog* sure isn't loathsome or blasphemous, so it should be even easier for this entity to sell," he said thoughtfully. "Be great if it could work on Medlum, or whoever's in charge at Firebrand, and get him to buy my script."

Kneeling beside the cloth bag, he carefully dipped a hand inside.

"Yow!"

A shock had come snaking up his arm when his fingers touched the casket.

Dan yanked his hand free, backed off.

He sighed, inhaled, sighed. Kneeling again, he thrust both hands inside and took hold of the chest. This time he felt only a mild electrical tingle.

He hefted the chest out — it felt as though it weighed thirty pounds or thereabouts — and placed it on the rug. He consulted the note. "Okay, I open this thing and read the spell. Sounds simple enough."

He kept the note in his left hand and took hold of the circular handle atop the lid with his right. The metal box had a deep greenish tinge and its sides were scrawled with blurred symbols and some kind of strange writing. Dan thought it might be runic script, although he couldn't recall having seen runic script before.

He tugged at the lid, but the box didn't open.

Setting the note on the floor, he took hold of the handle with both hands.

The lid popped open. Next an enormous amount of intensely bright light came exploding out of the casket. Red flashes of lightning, blue flashes, yellow.

And a tremendous foul-smelling gust of wind came spilling out as

well. It hit Dan hard in the midsection, sending him tumbling backward.

He sat down on the rug, hard, tipped over a stack of last week's newspapers, and went toppling back into unconsciousness.

"It is indeed most incredible that anyone might live in such a squalid and slovenly manner."

Dan became aware of a somewhat nasal voice muttering, along with a crisp brushing sound. He realized he was stretched out on his sofa, face up.

"There is, I swear, dust on every possible surface. It is no wonder that I have sneezed thrice since my arrival."

Dan, very tentatively, opened his eyes.

Lying on the rug just in front of the sofa he'd awakened on was his seven-year-old vacuum cleaner. The bag had been ripped asunder and the handle was twisted and scorched black.

He sat up, feeling briefly woozy. "What the hell happened to my vacuum?"

"The same thing, my lad, that shall befall you, unless you cease this unseemly caterwauling."

Dan blinked at the figure across the living room. "Mr. Bismarck? What are you doing in my living room — and sweeping the floor?"

"I had to resort to the broom, since that infernal engine refused to perform properly." A thin, balding man of fifty, dressed in a wrinkled gray suit, was sweeping dust and lint from the rug into a dustpan. He sneezed once, set the dented dustpan aside.

"Yeah, but why is my tenth-grade guidance counselor doing my housecleaning?"

"Someone most assuredly needs must tackle the chore, my lad. You have neglected the task for many a —"

"I've been working on a new screenplay, which takes up most of my time." He got up, finding that he was wobbly on his feet. "But the point is — why are you here at all?"

"Because you set me free from the dread casket, wherein I was imprisoned for a tediously lengthy stretch of time." Bismarck straightened up, still holding the broom.

Dan sat down, eyeing him. "You were what was in that box?" He

noticed now that the inscribed casket was sitting on his lopsided coffee table, wide open and empty.

"Imprisoned by a vicious spell put upon me by that dimwitted kinsman of your slatternly mistress," he answered. "I have assumed this bland and more palatable shape so as not to cause you unease."

"I was never, actually, that fond of Mr. Bismarck."

Bismarck carefully placed the broom against the wall. "You must take my word for it, young master, that what you see before you is a more acceptable form than my true one," he assured Dan. "Mortals, it has been my experience over the years, do not, alas, take kindly to creatures who loom ten feet high and are encrusted with large, scabby scales and happen to be sickly green in color. If, however, you would prefer to continue our discourse with me in my true —"

"No, we can settle for Mr. Bismarck." He made another attempt to stand. "How'd you know what he looked like?"

"Whilst you dozed, I shifted through your memories, which are, I might add, even more disordered than your pigsty of a domicile."

"You can do that?"

"Obviously." Bismarck, his conservative gray necktie dangling, bent and began stacking up scattered newspapers. "Is there any rational reason, my lad, for keeping these fugitive periodicals about?"

"Well, I like to read the funnies a week at a time."

"I thought not." Bismarck pointed his left hand, palm up, at the gathered papers.

The stack shimmered for a few bright seconds before disappearing completely.

Dan took a few careful steps away from where the newspapers had been. "Besides doing parlor tricks — can you do what Elijah Higgardy says in the note?"

"I would have obliged you in any way, bringing you untold wealth and worldwide notoriety." Bismarck shook his head sadly. "That is, had you followed the protocol and recited the proper incantation at the proper time. I fear, however, that you did not fulfill the requirements of the ancient spell."

"How the hell could I? I was out cold and you probably had something to do with that, too."

"When one's vital essence has been imprisoned within a cramped little chest for endless years, my lad, a certain amount of pressure needs must build up."

"So — what are you saying? You're backing out? Seems to me, as a demonic entity, that you should be required by cosmic law, or whatever, to do what you're supposed to do."

Bismarck laughed. It wasn't, exactly, the laugh of the real Mr. Bismarck as Dan recalled it from high school days. "You know precious little about the arcane laws of black sorcery, my lad."

"I did a *Twilight Zone* script when they revived the show a few seasons ago."

"It may be possible, since, I acknowledge, you did do me a very great favor in freeing me from my enforced durance, to do you a *small* favor." He smiled, making an unsettling chuckling noise. "What, pray tell, do you most desire?"

"Well, for starters I'd like — "

"I regret, young sir, that *one* favor, a solitary boon, is all that I feel in the mood to perform for you." He held up one finger and for a few seconds it looked green and scaly.

Dan sighed, resigned. "Well, I have a script — a motion picture screenplay — over with the Firebrand people. Could you work some magic to guarantee they'd buy it?"

Bismarck snapped his fingers, causing sparks to fly. "A simple task, to be sure," he replied. "What sort of money would such a transaction bring into your coffers?"

"A million bucks, if we're lucky."

"I note, from scanning your disordered thoughts, that with such a sum one might live quite comfortably hereabouts. At the very least, one might *begin* to exist in a most comfortable and sybaritic fashion."

"You're not interested in money for yourself, are you?"

"Throughout untold centuries, I must confess, the acquiring of lucre has been a major hobbyhorse of mine."

"But you're an all-powerful demonic entity. Can't you, say, just manufacture gold?"

"Most assuredly, but where, may I ask, is the *fun* in that?" He seated himself, very stiff and upright, upon an armchair. "You might reflect, my

lad, on the fact that, when you were offered anything, you asked not for gold but for the success of this play script of yours. That most certainly indicates, I surmise, that ego is what is driving you. That and the spur of fame."

"Yeah, I suppose that's so. Do demons have egos?"

"Some have egos even larger than mine. I have a particular enemy who...Ah, but that's neither here nor there."

"Is your enemy a demon, too? Is he the one who sent the lightning bolt that — "

"Now that I'm up and around again, we need not be concerned with that," said Bismarck.

"Now then, young Master Daniel, ere I embark on the task of persuading these moguls to purchase your script, I needs must familiarize myself much more thoroughly with this community. Hollywood has no doubt changed much since I was last out of the cask."

"How do you figure to fill yourself in?"

"I shall begin by a course of reading and studying. Then we shall embark on a few illuminating tours of the enclave and study its present natives."

"That's going to take time."

"I have, being immortal, an infinite supply."

"I don't. Besides which, this guy Medlum or Washburn may not be in charge of Firebrand all that long. Executives have a high turnover in this town, so we really have to hit while — "

"*Variety. The Hollywood Reporter.*"

"Hum?"

"I have procured those names from your tangled thoughts. You seem to think those journals will provide me background on the motion picture business as well as the present folkways and mores of this benighted community."

"I suppose so, sure. I have a big stack of — Shit, did you zap those, too?"

"You needn't fret, my lad." Bismarck etched a small circle in the air with his left thumb.

There followed a loud crackling, popping sound. A pile of trade dailies appeared on the throw rug in front of the tiny imitation fireplace.

"That's very impressive," observed Dan. "If you did a trick like that in front of Washburn, he'd be eager to sign."

"No, I intend to work much more subtly and cunningly than that," the demon assured him. "Am I correct in assuming that you are not equipped to provide me with a cup of mulled wine?"

"No, but I could send out for — "

"We will let it pass." Bismarck caused the top copies of the trades to float over to his lap. "I shall commence my studies at once."

THE NEXT DAY was filled with sun and wind. When Nancy showed up at Dan's humble cottage early in the afternoon, her long red hair was windblown. "You were extremely cryptic over the phone," she accused in a whisper as she lingered on his welcome mat.

"Lots of people have told me that lately," he replied, also in a whisper. "Thing is, it's difficult talking about a demon when he's sitting in the same room with you.

"Is he extremely awful looking?"

"Not at the moment, no.

She straightened her shoulders. "Well, I'd better go in and have a look at him. After all, he is, you know, *my* demon."

"Not exactly."

"What do you mean? My cousin left him to me."

"True, except I didn't quite follow all those instructions perfectly and...all he's agreed to is *one* favor."

"That's okay. If I think about it carefully, with maybe some input from you, I can ask for something that'll help my acting career or guarantee me a — "

"One favor for *me*, Nancy."

"For you? Hey, that's awfully darn selfish of you, Dan. I mean, poor old Mr. Tripple risked death and possibly eternal damnation to see that the ancient chest was delivered to — "

"Did you or did you not, Nancy, drop that thing off on me last night? Didn't you say I was to experiment with the chest? Risk my life, in fact, face a little eternal damnation of my own because you were afraid to mess with it?"

"That's so, yes. Still, though, I assumed you were one of my few honest and upright friends, that you wouldn't pull a Hollywood shuffle on me."

"Hiya, sweetheart! How's tricks?" Bismarck appeared in the doorway beside Dan. He was clad now in prewashed jeans, a designer paisley shirt, Italian boots and skier sunglasses.

Nancy's forehead wrinkled. "This isn't your agent, is it?"

"No, it's your demon. Bismarck, Nancy Quillen. Nancy, Bismarck."

"I thought he'd been bottled up for decades or something. How come he talks like that?"

"Relax, hon. I got hip since I popped out of the box."

Dan shook his head. "He reads a lot," he explained. "He found some old Hollywood novels in my office and he thinks —"

"I read through all the trades, too, sis." Pushing Dan back inside, Bismarck advanced and kissed the actress on the cheek. "You got a whole lot of class, hon."

"Thanks, but I —"

"C'mon inside and let me explain what I got in mind for you two kiddies."

Very reluctantly, Nancy entered Dan's small living room. "It's much neater in here," she observed.

"That was Bismarck." Dan retreated over to his sofa and sat. "What plans are you alluding to?" he asked the demon.

Bismarck perched on the arm of an armchair, swinging one snakeskin boot slowly to and fro. "Like I said, Danny Boy, I have been eyeballing the trade sheets, soaking up the info, and I —"

"What about old Mr. Tripple?" Nancy wanted to know. "Did you do that to him — and my best chair?"

The demon held up both hands in an I'm-as-innocent-as-a-lamb gesture. "I've got some powerful ancient enemies," he explained. "Especially an uncouth demon who calls himself Shug Nrgyzb. The old coot got himself tangled up with a long-running feud and —"

"Enemies who can throw lightning bolts under doors?" she asked, hands on hips.

"Everything is under control, babe."

She said, "Are we, Dan and I, likely to get caught in the crossfire or whatever?"

"Cool it, sis. Not to worry. Now that I'm up and around and looking good, everything will be okay," he assured her. "If you bozos are through heckling, I can get down to brass tacks." Bismarck snapped his fingers, producing red and yellow sparks, and a page torn from *The Hollywood Reporter* appeared in his hand. "What I've decided, kids, is to make us all rich. Get me? So what we are going to do is — "

"Hey, what about my screenplay? You promised you'd — "

"Oh, your screenplay, huh?" Nancy seated herself beside Dan and gave him a sharp poke in the ribs. "This guy promises only one darn single favor and you, instead of asking him to free me from a career where I mostly do commercials devoted to products that people use exclusively in the toilet, you selfishly think only of — "

"Whoa, Nance," suggested the demon. "Hear me out, okay? In yesterday's rags there was this yarn about a hotshot kid named Dinky Macmillan. Seems the little toad just walked off the set of the remake of *Bomba the Jungle Boy*, a \$74,000,000 flick lensing over at Firebrand."

"His father is who actually runs his career," Nancy told the demon. "He decided the \$13,000,000 salary they're paying his boy isn't sufficient. Considering that Dinky has to run around wearing nothing but an animal skin and thereby risk sunburn, skin rash, and prickly heat."

"Thirteen million smackers for a whelp who ain't even old enough to shave," said Bismarck, his eyes glowing redly behind the tinted lenses. "Now suppose, gang, that you walk into this goniff's office — Washburn is his name — you stroll into his office and you inform the gink that you've got a boy who can act rings around Dinky? He's perfect for Bomba and, the beauty part is, the kid'll do the gig for a measly ten million bucks."

Dan held up his left hand and started ticking off fingers. "Firstly, by now every kid star in town, male and female, has been offered to Firebrand to take over the role. Secondly, Dinky Macmillan's dad is noted for this kind of maneuver. By Monday, Washburn and his partners will be begging Dinky to come back and they'll up the salary a couple million dollars."

"Dinky won't be able to play Bomba." Bismarck grinned.

"Sure, he will. Once they promise him, say, \$15,000,000, he'll jump into that leopard skin and risk poison ivy, poison oak, and Rocky Mountain Spotted Fever. There is no — "

"The poor little bugger broke his leg this morning. In three places. Won't be able to cinemact for several months. Real pity."

Nancy asked, "Where'd you hear that?"

"Trust me, darling, it's true." Bismarck checked his gold wristwatch. "Dinky took a serious fall down the stairs in his posh Bel Air mansion about sixteen minutes ago. Make that seventeen."

Nancy grabbed hold of Dan's arm, squeezing hard. "Can you make things like that happen?" she asked the demon in a faint voice.

Bismarck merely chuckled in reply. "Continue, Dano. You were, helpfully, pointing out the flaws in my plan. Pray, go on."

After swallowing twice, Dan said, "Well, thirdly then. Thirdly, Washburn won't see us. We don't have sufficient clout."

"You'll have clout. I'll manufacture that."

"Possibly, but we also lack a child actor."

"On the contrary, pal." The demon stood up and spread his arms wide. "You got me, yours truly."

"It won't work," said Nancy. "There is no possible way that a demon from the fiery pits of —"

"Listen up, sister. I been studying this Dinky." Bismarck sat again, leaned back in the armchair. "I perused the trades, media mags, newspaper interviews. The kid is cute, for one thing. He's got a sweet innocent face, but with a touch of mischief. He's got just the right amount of the right kind of freckles and he's got that appealing, politely unkempt blond hair. Mothers in the audience would just love to mother the little bastard, fathers would be proud to sire a kid like that. He's independent but not defiant, gentle but no sissy. He gets good grades but he's one of the boys and no kissass. Little girls sitting there in the movie palaces and the multiplexes have got the hots for him, boys pretend to loathe him but secretly every blessed one of them would like to be just like him. He's got the appeal of a puppy and the soul of a midget conman. You can't beat that."

"Maybe so, but how do —"

"Do you believe that Dinky sprang in that form out of his mom's loins? Naw, nope, his pappy, a showbiz-crazed goon, worked for years molding him into what he is today. It's like developing a new kind of rose or a new cough medicine." Bismarck rose up again. "But what mortals can

do over a period of years, any self-respecting demon can bring off in a couple weeks tops. I can change my looks and persona and become a kid star."

And he was right.

It was a little over three months later that Dan moved into his mansion in Bel Air. Originally built by a silent movie cowboy and more recently resided in by an extremely, though briefly, successful rock group, a multimillionaire from some Arab country Dan wasn't previously aware existed and a conservative radio talk show host, the huge house was a mix of Moroccan, Gothic and imitation Frank Lloyd Wright. It sat on an acre and a half of land that was mostly covered with trees and foliage uprooted in Brazil and transplanted here back in the early 1980s. There was also a miniature railroad, large enough for small people to ride in, curving through the tropical jungle and circling the miniature golf course.

On the afternoon his agent fell dead, Dan, wearing sky blue shorts, was sprawled out on a canvas chair by his Olympic-size pool. He was staring, somewhat morosely, into the flickering blue water. Nancy was sitting, somewhat morosely, on the turquoise tiles at the edge of the pool. Dressed in a minimal crimson swimsuit, she was dangling her long tan legs in the water at the deep end.

"Look on the bright side," she was advising.

"Which is?"

"We're all rich now."

"Money isn't everything."

The red-haired actress gestured at the mansion that loomed up behind them, its slanting red tile roof glowing in the bright sunny haze. "Isn't this a dream house we're living in?"

"Three or four dreams, actually, jammed together."

"Washburn probably would have liked your script." She got up, started drying her legs with an enormous orange towel. "It was, after all, purely by chance that the poor man died just as he sat down to read it."

"People don't often spontaneously combust," he pointed out. "I looked up the statistics. Washburn of Firebrand Pictures was only the fourth such case in the United States this year."

"Three other cases, Dan, mean it isn't unique."

"Those three all took place here in Southern California — since Bismarck popped out of his box."

She walked, barefooted, over to where he was stretched out in the afternoon sun. Leaning forward, she said quietly, "He doesn't want you to call him that anymore, remember?"

"He's over at the studio. So why whisper?" He shook his head. "Kenny McNulty. What a nitwit name he picked for himself."

"The name was Washburn's idea, rest his soul," she said as she towed her back. "I happen to think it's a really cute name for a kid."

Shrugging, Dan said, "Another thing I'm not pleased about is our posing as Bismarck's guardians."

"Well, we *are* his guardians. And acting as such made it very much easier to get Washburn to take a look at your script. There's nothing wrong with a little dishonesty if it furthers our careers."

"Yeah, I don't mind dishonesty that gets me another screen credit or you a part in a picture. But dishonesty that turns Bismarck into the second most popular kid actor in Hollywood in just three months is unsettling."

"It is fascinating, though, how that little dickens became a major star, got the lead in the remake of *Bomba the Jungle Boy* and has already brought in over \$5,000,000."

"Little dickens? Nancy, he may look like the second cutest twelve-year-old in America now, but he's really a huge scabrous monster."

"You really, Dan, don't know that for certain."

"Sure, I do. He told me."

"That could be an exaggeration. There's an awful lot of bullshit handed out in this town."

"Why would anybody *pretend* to be a disgusting, loathsome creature?"

"He probably wanted to impress you. I mean, he was closed in that casket all that time, scrunched up in there feeling bad. It's simply an ego thing, is my guess."

"I know all about his damned ego. That's why I'm Kenny McNulty's guardian rather than the second most popular screenwriter in Hollywood."

"He promises you'll write his next movie, the remake of *Little Miss*

Marker," she reminded. "And you're supposed to write a good, attention-getting part for me."

"Nobody's going to want him to be in that. A cute little *girl* is what's called for. Shirley Temple was the first one."

"He says the switch is what'll make it a hit. Kenny starring as Little Mister Marker. It's going to be a terrific family picture for the Christmas season."

Dan, gathering up his yellow robe, got up off the chair. "You talk to him when I'm not around, huh? You seem to know a hell of a lot about what he has in mind."

"Granted he's a demon inside," conceded the actress, settling into the canvas chair he'd abandoned. "But he's an awfully cute kid. Bright, too. And when he smiles with that little freckled face of his, it's...heartwarming."

"206."

"What?"

"Freckles. Bismarck has exactly 206 freckles. He worked that out on our computer, using data gathered in several national surveys about cuteness and likability among preteens."

"Well, even if it is calculated, it works." She gestured again at the mansion. "His cuteness brought us this."

The phone sitting on the poolside drink table beeped sedately.

Squatting gracefully, Nancy answered. "McNulty residence."

"McNulty residence? What I'm looking for, dear, is the Danny Barner residence. Has that little schmuck forced Dan to change his name to his?"

"Oh, hi, Scotty, how're you doing? This is Nancy." She clamped her hand over the mouthpiece. "It's your sleazy erstwhile agent. He sounds annoyed."

"Tell him to go — Nope, wait." He took the phone from her. "Scotty, old buddy, been a long time. How are you?"

"I'm livid, enraged, incensed and about to turn vindictive, Danny."

"Don't call me Danny. It — "

"My lawyers will be descending on you shortly, pal. Letting that goniff Lanzer at Lanzer-Brightside Talent represent you and that odious kid is a breach of your agreement with me."

"We never had anything but a verbal contract, Scotty."

"Not so, Daniel, and like hell. I dug out my copy this very morning."

"Bullshit. There is no such thing."

"I've got one. I faxed a copy over to my attorneys, three of the nastiest bastards in the West. They started chuckling with glee before half the damned thing had come oozing out of the fax at their end. To put it in layman's terms, Danny, we have got you by the goonies. I am going to get *half* of what you earn managing this waif. *Plus* a goodly piece of what darling little Kenny himself earns. So don't try to — that's funny."

"What's funny?"

"It's really very odd, Danny, but my skin seems to have started giving off smoke," said his former agent, sounding perplexed. "Wisps of smoke are spilling out through my shirt front and from my collar. Hey, my ankles are blowing smoke rings. Listen, I don't have a medical book handy. Can you look up these symptoms and tell —"

"Sounds like spontaneous combustion, Scotty. Quick, dive in the shower and turn on the cold water!"

"Oh, god! I'm turning into a flaming —"

A huge whooshing sound followed, then a harsh crackling. Scotty screamed once and the phone went dead.

Dan looked at the phone in his hand, shuddered, and flung it into the pool. "He killed Scotty."

"Who killed Scotty?"

"Bismarck. Kenny. Set him on fire."

"Really, Dan, the little guy is over at the Firebrand studio right now looping dialogue on *Bomba*. There's no possibility he could be over on Rodeo Drive setting fire to your old agent."

When Dan shook his head, he found his whole body started shaking along with it. "Demons can get you from a distance. That's what sorcery and black magic is all about, Nancy."

"I can't really believe he'd do anything like that. He's really become such a cute little kid."

"He's killing people," shouted Dan, taking hold of both her bare arms. "We've got to control him."

She pulled free of him. "That won't be at all easy," she warned.

...

A sneak preview of *Bomba the Jungle Boy* was held on a warm, windy night late last year. Bodnoff, age twenty-six, the man who had headed Firebrand since Washburn's fiery demise, was there with Nina Vertigo, the blonde former fashion model who'd made her screen debut in *Birdbath III*. This time, unlike numerous prior occasions, she recognized Dan. In fact, she bestowed an impressive bear hug on him in the lobby of the Westwood theater and kissed him fervently in the ear. All the movie industry and media people who were there had no trouble in recognizing Dan and Nancy, who had a new shade of red hair just for tonight. Even Haskell & Delbert, the noted television movie reviewers, were friendly, both pretending that they hadn't actually given Dan's *Birdbath III* their lowest rating, four thumbs down.

Bismarck was in an especially good mood and evidenced none of the nasty side he sometimes showed on the sound stage. He made cute, sly remarks to the Firebrand executives, their spouses and dates. He playfully patted Nina Vertigo on the backside, pretended to drop popcorn down Trina Boop's cleavage. For a quiet midweek screening in Westwood, this one drew quite a crowd of important people. As Trina mentioned, "I really, you know, felt that I absolutely *must* attend." She was, some noted, looking even more glassy-eyed than usual.

Bismarck, in his appealing Kenny McNulty persona, was a very charming young man. He had all the charisma of Dinky Macmillan — who didn't attend because a second fall in his mansion had broken three of his ribs — plus a special something of his own. Several grandmothers in the preview audience sighed as he strolled down the aisle with Dan and Nancy. "Cute as a bug's ear," was the general opinion among them. Kenny was a slim, healthy-looking lad with good posture. His fresh-scrubbed face, dotted with its 206 freckles, had an enormous appeal.

He passed the wheelchair of a Vietnam veteran that was parked in the aisle midway. Crouching, he carried on a brief conversation with the vet and they both laughed a lot. Photographers from three newspapers and a news service got shots of that, video cameras from two local channels and one national news show got footage. For a preview on a week night in Westwood, there was an impressive media turnout. As Billi Jean Nolan of KTLA-TV remarked, "I just felt that I *had* to attend this one and cover it for the station."

"Did you do that?" Dan asked in a whisper as the lights started to go dim.

"Do what," asked the guileless Bismarck, "dim the lights?"

"Compel all these halfwits to come here tonight?"

Bismarck shrugged, giving Dan one of his most winning grins. "Gee, Unca Dan, how the heck could I, golly, do that? You think I cast a magical spell or something that compelled 'em to come trooping here like mindless zombies or somethin'?" He laughed ingratiatingly. "Gosh, the next thing you'll be sayin' is that I'm gonna use some kinda mind control to make sure they all fill out their darned preview cards the right way."

Nancy, sitting on the other side of the demon, gave him a small nudge in the side. "Too much, soft-pedal it," she advised.

"You think so, Auntie Nance?" he asked in a low voice.

"Too many gee whiz touches, yes. And, Kenny, please, don't roll your cute little eyes so much. They're going to think you're on drugs."

"Thanks for the tip." He patted her on the arm. "Now what say we settle down and enjoy my debut flicker?"

The reaction to *Bomba* was astounding. It drew a standing ovation from the 300 people in the small theater before the second reel had finished. After the film there was another standing ovation during which almost everyone yelled, "Bravo!" enthusiastically and several of the seats got busted from people jumping up and down on them in their fervor. The opinion cards carried opinions that ranged from "Marvelous" and "Absolutely magnificent" to "Earthshaking" and "I have never been so moved by a motion picture."

There were no incidents, or so Dan thought. Next morning, however, he found out from an account in the paper that an elderly woman had succumbed to a heart attack during the final minutes of the showing.

He confronted Bismarck on that at the breakfast table out on the mosaic patio. "Haven't I been warning you about this sort of stuff? You promised to cease destroying people, Bismarck."

Bismarck smiled his best Kenny smile and looked up from his bowl of oatmeal. "A very stubborn old broad, Uncle Dan," he said, reaching for his orange juice. "I simply couldn't get sufficient control of her disordered mind. Can you believe she was going to write down that my maiden flick was 'Putrid?'" He gave a boyish laugh. "You'll note, by the way, we got a nice mention of the film in her obit. You can't have too much publicity."

When the Academy Award nominations came out early this year, there was Kenny McNulty among the five nominated for the Best Actor Award. The demon was elated, but it didn't improve his disposition a great deal. In fact, during the next few months Bismarck added nearly a dozen names to his shitlist and also succeeded in crossing off over half of them. He refrained, probably because Dan had accused him of using the method inordinately, from causing any further spontaneous combustions among the residents of Greater Los Angeles who'd annoyed him, insulted him, or stood too determinedly in the way of his burgeoning career as a child star or in the way of either Dan or Nancy. The secretary of the Lanzer-Brightside Talent Agency, who'd spoken of him as a "lousy spoiled brat" behind his back, drowned in very shallow water during an impulsive midnight swim in the surf off Malibu, a sweet, curly-haired ten-year-old girl, who was rumored to be a strong contender for the leading role in the remake of *Little Miss Marker*, was arrested for selling cocaine to a plainclothes cop; a two-time Oscar-winning screenwriter, who'd just about persuaded Bodnoff at Firebrand to let him write the next Kenny McNulty script instead of Dan, was killed in a runaway forest fire that hit only his neighborhood out in one of the canyons.

Bismarck's most flamboyant attack, though again uncredited, took place in the spring in front of an audience of several million television viewers. The Haskell & Delbert *Movie Time* show was going out live that week. Haskell, the fat one, was arguing with Delbert about the merits of *Bomba the Jungle Boy*. He disagreed, quite sarcastically, with his partner's enthusiastic approval of the film and his praise for what he termed Kenny McNulty's "deft debut performance."

After referring to Kenny as "a knock-kneed underage Tarzan wannabe with less than ten percent of the charm of Dinky Macmillan," Haskell began to render one of his famous two-thumbs-down verdicts, when suddenly he brought both hands up to his chest, muttered something in what scholars later identified as Ancient Persian — a language he had no knowledge of — and toppled out of his chair, dead from a massive heart attack.

The fat private detective showed up at the mansion the day of Haskell's funeral. Bismarck had insisted on attending and Nancy, who

had somewhat more control over him than Dan, went along to make sure he didn't dance on the departed film critic's grave or cause the coffin to go up in a burst of sulfurous flames. The demon had threatened to do both. Dan remained home, struggling with the latest revisions of his *Little Mister Marker* script.

Bismarck had insisted on, and persuaded Bodnoff to go along with, a scene wherein Kenny taps the legs of a crippled Vietnam veteran and causes him to rise up and walk. Dan had maintained that it would be a hard scene to get much comedy out of, but Bodnoff pointed out that all the great Hollywood comedies, such as *It's A Wonderful Life*, mixed in a little sentiment with the laughs.

LITTLE MR. MARKER: Heck, things ain't anywhere near as bad as they seem, fella.

VET: They're worse, you little dork. You weren't in 'Nam, so —

The front door chimes sounded.

On the wall of Dan's large den one of the security system screens clicked to life and showed him the slightly distorted image of a chubby, rumpled man of about forty who was standing on the red tile front porch. He held a scruffy hand-tooled briefcase to his chest.

Dan got up and walked over to the mike. "Yeah, what?"

"Mr. Barner, is it?" The pudgy man had a European accent and he looked familiar.

"That's right. So?"

"I'm Ernie Medlum and — "

"Do I know you?" The name seemed vaguely familiar.

"I'm a private investigator. I was working for your agent, Scotty Blackett."

"Former agent," corrected Dan. "What's the problem?"

"There's something important I think we must discuss," said the plump detective.

"Does it involve money?"

"In a way, yes."

After hesitating for a few seconds, Dan reached out and flipped a toggle on the wall panel. "Come on in, Mr. Medlum," he invited. "I'll

meet you in the front parlor, on your left as you enter. By the way, I'm sure I've seen you before."

"Walter Slezak."

"Beg pardon?"

"People tell me I look a good deal like Walter Slezak."

"Him I never heard of "

"A character actor, back in the 1940s."

"Before my time. I'll see you in the front parlor"

"Thank you," said the detective. "I'm sure this will prove interesting to you."

And it did.

"That's a very impressive take," said Dan.

"Don't tease him," said Nancy.

Bismarck was standing in the middle of the vast twilight living room of the mansion. His fists were clenched, his 206 freckles were glowing bright red, and greenish smoke was swirling out of his ears. "Assassin," he said in a voice that was much deeper than the one he used as Kenny McNulty. "Viper, Judas!"

"Me or the private eye?"

"You, you snake!" Bismarck pointed an accusing finger at him.

A thin beam of sizzling blue lightning came shooting forth.

Dan managed to dodge it and it incinerated a potted rubber plant to his right.

"Kenny, don't lose your temper," cried Nancy as she took a step in his direction.

"Are you in on this too, sweetheart?"

Regaining his balance, Dan said, "Look, all I did was talk to a sleazy private eye who's trying to blackmail us. Why are you — "

"Don't you know who that was you let into our house?" The smoke coming out of Bismarck's ears was purplish now.

"Ernie Medlum. He was a friend of Scotty, who hired him to look into your background. When he discovered you didn't have any background, he — "

"You should have recognized him."

"I did, but that was only because he looks a lot like Walter Brennan," said Dan. "No, Walter Slezak."

"The traces are all around," said Bismarck, angrily sniffing at the air. "That was *him!*"

"Who?" asked Nancy. "Really, Kenny, you have to try to be calm. I don't know a heck of a lot about demonic medicine, but it can't be good for you to be spouting smoke out of your ears, hon."

"That was Shug Nrgyzb, you dimwits! He assumed human form to sneak into my stronghold while I was away."

He turned green and scaly for near to five seconds and then was the regular Kenny again.

Dan said, "Your age-old enemy and nemesis, the powerful demon who's vowed to destroy you?"

"That Shug Nrgyzb, yeah."

Nancy took a few more very slow steps toward him. "You told us you were far more powerful than he is. So if he shows up while you're here, you can merely — "

"I fudged a little on the facts," admitted the demon. "He's about twice as powerful as I am, were the truth known. Now that he's had a looksee at my lair, he's in a better position to come back inside and destroy me." He started to point at Dan again. "And it was you who let him in. Had you not, the rules of the netherworld specify that — "

"Can't you do anything to keep him away?" Dan had dropped to the floor when the finger started to swing in his direction.

Bismarck forgot about pointing at him and rubbed at his chin instead. "I might be able to fortify this place with sufficient spells and charms," he said finally, glancing uneasily around. "But I don't know what my chances would be out in the open."

"Kenny," reminded Nancy, "you have to go outside sometimes. I mean, for instance, day after tomorrow the Mature Women Reporters' League is going to give you the Golden Bosko Award at that luncheon in — "

"Tell those old skwacks I've come down with the pip," he said. "Dan, you go in my place and accept that stupid dornick. Whip up about 500 words of crap and tell those old broads I dictated it to you."

"That's not going to help your image any," warned Nancy, frowning at him.

"Screw my image," he told her. "For now I'm concentrating on survival."

* * *

After a few days had passed Bismarck began to relax and became more like the old Kenny McNulty. He had spent long hours incanting and spell casting. Odd, musty-smelling mystical volumes materialized in the living room and he enlisted Dan and Nancy in photocopying pertinent passages from them. He turned green three times, a reddish purple once. At one point the demon had the ten volume set of the works of Count Monstrodamus piled up on the butcher block kitchen table. He was using the infamous Prague edition of 1813, the one rumored to be bound in human skin. All the research and black magic, according to Bismarck, had succeeded in fortifying the mansion against demonic attack.

He still refused to leave the grounds, not even when *Show Biz Tonite!* begged him to come in and tape a seven-minute interview. He also refused to allow Lori Pike from *Interview!* into the house to do a segment with him. "You can't tell what shape Shug Nrgyzb might assume," he pointed out.

Bodnoff at Firebrand was incensed and ticked off because Kenny McNulty wouldn't do any public appearances to promote his Oscar nomination, but Dan was able to convince him that under-saturation was building up suspense and that, very soon, Kenny was going to emerge from seclusion.

During the third week of his withdrawal from public life Bismarck slipped into Dan's den late one afternoon. He straddled a straight-back wooden chair, gave one of his rueful Kenny McNulty smiles and said, "We got a problem."

"You mean in addition to your being besieged by a rival demon and our alienating Bodnoff and a multitude of lesser Firebrand moguls since you've become a hermit?"

"I admire the way stress doesn't diminish your wiseass capabilities," said the demon. "What I've been brooding about, Daniel, is the Academy Award."

"You probably won't win. So if you're not at the ceremonies next week, it won't —"

"I'm going to win."

"*Bomba* was your first picture and you're up against two dying old-timers, a reigning hunk and a guy making a comeback after a long slump. The odds are against you."

"It's too late to reverse the spell. I'm a shoo in."

"Spell?" Dan pushed back from his desk and slowly stood. "You used black magic and sorcery to assure that all the members of the Academy will vote for you?"

"Well, that's more certain than full-page ads in the trades, bribery, or coercion."

"But it isn't honest."

"Hey, this is Hollywood. What's honesty got to do with anything?"

Dan sat again, slumping. "You really can cast a spell that makes all those people vote for you?"

"A cinch, piece of cake," answered Bismarck. "The problem is that I can't turn it off now."

"I can accept for you or Nancy can. Yeah, she'd be better. A pretty redhead in a striking gown will distract them from the fact that you're hiding under the bed. You're absolutely certain about winning?"

"Didn't I rig the damned nomination in the first place?"

"You did?"

"I don't take anything for granted."

Slumping further, Dan said, "Okay, so we get Nancy to accept your Oscar. I'll write the acceptance speech. You'll say how humbly grateful you are and that you expect to be back in the public eye very soon — You are, you know, going to have to resurface pretty soon. We'll make up some excuse that sounds okay but doesn't imply you've gone goofy, are taking a drug cure, or have a serious social disease."

Bismarck frowned deeply. "But, hey, this is a major event in my life."

"You've been a demon for untold centuries," Dan reminded. "In all that time you must have done something more important than winning a statuette."

"But I happen to be Kenny McNulty at the moment. I want, naturally, to savor the award. When your peers single you out for praise, that means something."

"Your peers are only honoring you, Bismarck, because you worked a supernatural hoodoo on them."

"Are you saying that I'm not gifted and charming? That millions of movie-goers don't love and adore me?"

"You're okay as a kid actor."

"What about the lunch boxes?"

"Okay, the lunch boxes with your Kenny McNulty face on them are selling very well nationwide. What sort of spell did you use for that?"

Jumping up, he spread his little arms wide. "None," said the demon. "I didn't use a bit of magic or sorcery on any of our merchandising stuff. Not on the lunch boxes, the stupid toys, the comic book, the underwear or the CD-ROM games. I wanted to test my appeal, my charisma."

"Actually, though, it isn't you they're buying," he pointed out. "It's Kenny, a concoction."

"My concoction," he said. "And those millions who idolize me are expecting me to be there in person to accept that Oscar next week."

"Vanity."

"I'm not vain," insisted the demon. "Besides, if I do a no-show it'll probably affect the video cassette sales on *Bomba* as well as the box office for *Little Mister Marker* come next Christmas."

"What about Shrub Nurgrub — won't he pounce if you go out in public?"

"Shug Nrgyzb," corrected Bismarck. "Don't let him catch you mispronouncing his name."

"Well — won't you be in danger if you step off the estate?"

"I've been thinking about some counterspells. Very powerful stuff that ought to keep him off me," said the demon. "I think I'll be able to keep him at bay long enough to pick up the Oscar and maybe go to a couple of parties afterward. And if that works, then I'll probably be able to work out spells to keep him off for longer periods. That way my blossoming career won't go down the old toilet."

"It's worth trying then."

Bismarck moved to the doorway. "I want you in a traditional tux and I'll design Nancy's dress myself and materialize it. Simple, emerald green to flatter her red hair and cut down to about here in front." He tapped his sternum. "Get in touch with that halfwit Bodnoff and tell him to start his publicity mills grinding. I'm going to be there on Oscar night."

The evening of the Academy Awards was hot and unsettlingly clear. There was a harsh, bristly wind blowing in from the ocean. When the studio-provided pale gold limo carrying Dan, Nancy, and Bismarck pulled

up in front of the Marion Davies Memorial Pavilion in Santa Monica, the demon said, "You kiddies hop out first."

Frowning, Nancy asked, "What's wrong?"

"Not a blessed thing, kiddo."

"All your freckles have turned pale."

"Well, I'm picking up a few negative vibrations is all. Nothing serious," he told her. "Shoo. I'll follow."

"Is he out there?" asked Dan as the chauffeur opened the rear door "Do you sense him?"

"Listen to that crowd of nitwits," said the demon as he smiled a wide Kenny McNulty smile. He gave Dan a propelling shove in the small of his back.

Dan bumped into Nancy and she went stumbling out of the car and onto the sidewalk. "Thanks for helping me make a graceful entrance," she said over her shoulder as she straightened up.

"Nobody's paying any attention to us."

There were hundreds of enthusiastic fans on each side of the wide walkway leading to the entrance of the immense rose-colored pavilion, held back by red velvet ropes and uniformed guards.

After Dan and Nancy had walked a few steps along the pathway, a large blonde woman in a leather jacket spotted Kenny McNulty in the open doorway of the limo.

"It's little Kenny! Hi, sweetheart!"

Dan took hold of Nancy's arm. "Let's move out of the way in case they try to charge him."

"I feel extremely uneasy."

They took a few more steps and Dan suddenly halted. "There's Ernie Medlum," he said, noticing the fat private detective in the front row of fans on their right, pressed tight between a gray-haired woman and a teenager with a green crewcut.

"The one Kenny thinks is Shug Nrgyzb?"

"Him." Turning, Dan waved at Bismarck, who had one small foot out of the car. "Stay back in there. It's him!"

All sound seemed suddenly to be siphoned away. A sharp, absolute silence closed in and held on for several seconds. The clarity of the waning day intensified.

Then the palm trees that lined the street started to rattle and clatter. The ground began to shudder violently and the pavilion made huge rumbling groans.

Dan put an arm around Nancy. "Quake!"

"Holy Christ!" She hugged him, shutting her eyes.

The pavement all around them started cracking and bouncing.

Dan saw Medlum again. Standing apart from the frightened crowd, arms folded, a quirky smile touching his plump face. He was staring directly at the limo.

The fans were screaming, shouting, cursing.

A large jagged crack came sluicing along the street, heading toward the car that Bismarck was still sitting in. It grew wider and wider.

Bismarck thrust himself half out of the car, eyes narrowed, both hands, fingers spread wide, pointing at Medlum. He was chanting something that Dan couldn't hear.

The crack became suddenly as wide as the street and the limo, Bismarck and the driver who'd been huddling beside it all fell into the opening chasm.

Dan saw harsh yellowish flames come whooshing up from below the ground. Then the car vanished and the ground shut with a tremendous slamming bang.

The pavilion shivered five more times, a life-sized statue of Marion Davies swayed, teetered, and fell off the roof. Then the quake was over.

Dan scanned the crowds but there was no sign of Ernie Medlum. "He did this," he said. "Made the damned earth open up and swallow Bismarck."

Nancy started to cry. "Shit," she said, sobbing against his chest. "Just when I was starting to get someplace in this town, this had to happen."



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CURIOSITIES

CLARE WINGER HARRIS

GOOD fiction asks more questions than it answers. One of the greatest is, *What does it mean to be human?* This has been asked many times and in many ways, my favorite being the way Clare Winger Harris asked it in 1928 in "The Miracle of the Lily."

Harris tells of radio contact with an extraterrestrial civilization. Harris's aliens seem to be quite "human" in culture, intellect and ethics, and the exchange of data and technology benefits both planets.

But the alien race is threatened by tiny predators devouring their crops. Never having developed pesticides, the aliens call upon their Earthly friends for assistance.

At this point a new video link comes into service, and we learn that the intelligent, benevolent, civilized aliens are giant insects — and the pests are tiny hominids!

Question: Who are the humans, the civilized bugs or the miniature mammals?

Harris does not tell us.

Clare Winger Harris was born in 1891, in Freeport, Illinois. She grew up on the works of Jules Verne and H. G. Wells, and attended Smith College in Massachusetts. A brief biography from 1947 states that, "Mrs. Harris proudly claims the distinction of being the first woman science-fiction writer in the country."

That claim might be disputed by Gertrude Barrows Bennett, who was writing sf for *Argosy* and *All-Story Weekly* as early as 1917. But Harris was the first woman to write science fiction stories for the science fiction magazines.

Starting in 1926, Harris contributed eleven stories to *Weird Tales*, *Amazing Stories*, and *Science Wonder Quarterly*. While today's reader may find her prose creaky, the stories positively teem with still-fresh and provocative ideas.

In 1930 Harris "retired" to raise three sons. Her stories were later collected under the title *Away from the Here and Now*. If you come across a copy, grab it! ☛

—Richard A. Lupoff



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